VOLUME 16
NUMBER 10

AMAZING STORIES

OCTOBER 1941

THE HOLLOW PLANET by DON WILCOX

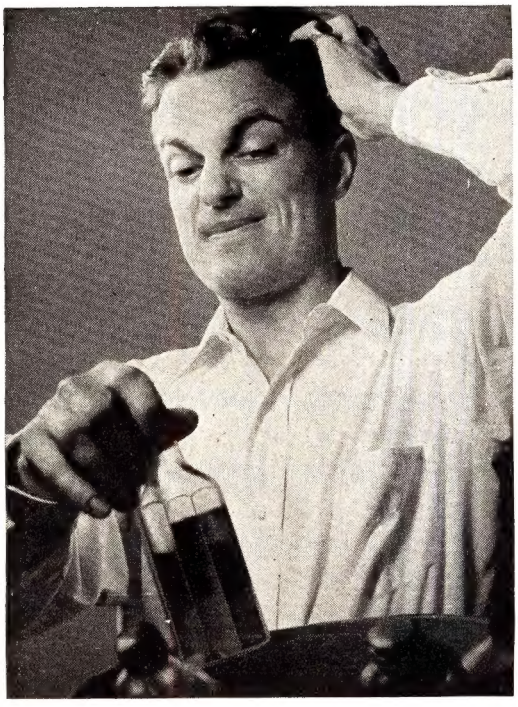
SEE BACK COVER

AMAZING STORIES

CRUSADE ACROSS THE VOID

by DWIGHT V. SWAIN

OCTOBER 25c



BOB WAS FOOLED . . . he thought he could get rid of those distressing flakes and scales with one application of some overnight remedy. He found, however, that it required persistent treatment, and used Listerine Antiseptic and massage twice daily to fight the condition. Now his scalp feels "like a million."

AND SO WAS MRS. K . . . she had blamed her itching, irritated scalp on reducing and changed her diet. Then an advertisement suggested that the condition might be the infectious type of dandruff. "It's simply wonderful," she says, "how Listerine Antiseptic and massage helped me."

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"I am now a Sergeant in the U.S. Army, Signal Corps. My duties cover Radio operating, maintenance of Army Transmitters and Receivers, operating Teletypes, handling duties of the Chief Operator in his absence."—SERGEANT RICHARD W. ANDERSON, U. S. Army. (Address omitted for military reasons.)

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Broadcasting stations (882 in the U.S.) employ thousands of Radio Technicians with average pay among the country's best paid industries. The Radio repair business is booming due to shortage of new home and auto Radio sets. (There are 57,400,000 in use) giving good jobs to thousands. Many other Radio Technicians take advantage of these opportunities to have their own Radio Service businesses. The Government needs many Civilian Radio Operators, Technicians. Think of the many good-pay jobs in connection with Aviation, Commercial, Police Radio and Public Address Systems. N. R. I. gives you the required knowledge of Radio for those jobs. N. R. I. trains you to be ready when Television opens new jobs. Mail the COUPON, NOW!

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J. E. SMITH, *President*
Dept. 2JM, National Radio Institute
Washington, D. C.

BROADCASTING STATIONS (top illustration) employ Radio Technicians as operators, installation, maintenance men and in other fascinating, steady, well-paying technical jobs. **FIXING RADIO SETS** (bottom illustration), a booming field today pays many Radio Technicians $30, $40, $50 a week. Others hold their regular jobs and make $5 to $10 a week extra in spare time.

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Front cover painting by Malcolm Smith, illustrating a scene from "Crusade Across The Void"
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AMAZING STORIES
October 1942

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Volume 16
Number 10

The Magic *of Mind*

WERE the great personages of the past victims of a stupendous hoax? Could such eminent men of the ancient world as Socrates, Pericles, and Alexander the Great have been deluded and cast under the spell of witchcraft—or did the oracles whom they consulted actually possess a *mysterious faculty of foresight?* That *the human mind can truly exert an influence over things and conditions* was not a credulous belief of the ancients, but a known and demonstrable fact to them. That there exists a wealth of infinite knowledge just beyond the border of our daily thoughts, which can be aroused and commanded at will, was not a fantasy of these sages of antiquity, but a dependable aid to which they turned in time of need.

It is time you realized that the rites, rituals and practices of the ancients were not superstitions, but subterfuges to conceal the marvelous workings of natural law from those who would have misused them. Telepathy, projection of thought, the materializing of ideas into helpful realities, are no longer thought by intelligent persons to be impossible practices, but instead, *demonstrable sciences,* by which a greater life of happiness may be had.

One of America's foremost psychologists and university instructors, says of his experiments with thought transference and the powers of mind—"The successes were much too numerous to be merely lucky hits and one can see no way for guessing to have accounted for the results." *Have you* that open-minded attitude of today which warrants a clear, positive revelation of the facts of mind which intolerance and bigotry have suppressed for years? *Advance with the times;* learn the truth about your inherited powers.

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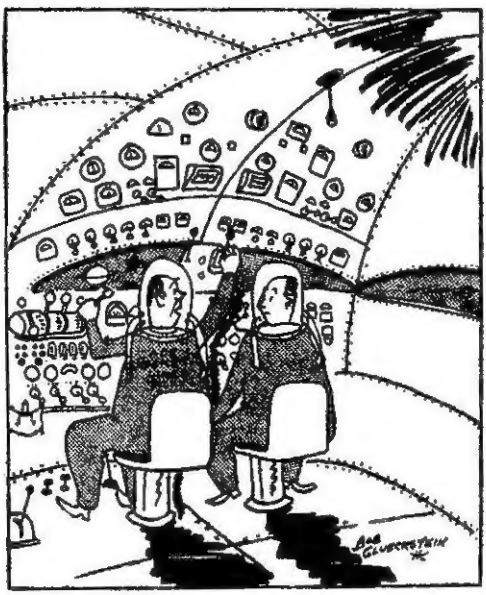
The OBSERVATORY by THE Editor

IT'S been a long time since we were out in space, but here we are, this month with a space ship cover. It's done by Malcolm Smith and the story built around it is the work of increasingly popular Dwight V. Swain. "Crusade Across The Void" is one of the neatest space yarns we've seen turned out in a long time. It seems no matter what you give this guy Swain to do, he does it as though he'd been doing it for years.

OUR newcomer, Leroy Yerxa, comes back with a short humor yarn that has a rather new idea in it. Not new scientifically, but new in its application. Incidentally, he'll appear with a rather unusual little short-short in our companion magazine this month, the October issue of *Fantastic Adventures*. It's about a "coward" on Bataan.

AN old favorite returns this month. Ed Earl Repp has always been able to turn out an unusual type of science fiction story, and this time he's proved himself able to keep up that reputation. You'll like "Dwellers in the Darkness."



"Sometimes I wonder if I know what I'm doing."

LANCELOT BIGGS literally "goes to town" in a new one by Nelson S. Bond. Naturally, we don't need to say anything about this one, but when we mention Bond, we have a little secret to impart. If you like his novels (aw please, fans, no more letters telling us that! Send 'em to Bond. We just haven't time to read rave mail all day long!) . . . if you like 'em, don't miss the November issue of *Fantastic Adventures*, on sale September 20th, because it has a *complete* novel in it, 50,000 words, by this master, and it's called "When Freemen Shall Stand."

NOW, just so you AMAZING STORIES readers don't get jealous, the November issue of your magazine also carries a complete novel. Fifty-six thousand words called "After an Age." Remember Eando Binder's "Darkness and Dawn"? Well, this is another by Binder, but better!

OUR reason for including these novel in complete form is because so many soldiers have begged us to quit the serials. You see, they find it hard to get all the parts of a serial, and who wants the boys to go into battle wondering how it all came out? The boys deserve a break, and we know you readers will shout for joy when you see novels like this laid right in your laps.

STANDING before you now is Don Wilcox, taking a bow. The reason for the bow is to acknowledge your plaudits. And the reason you'll be "plauditing" is his "The Hollow Planet" in this issue. It's a humdinger of a story, and one you can save for your kiddies to read. It'll be good for a long time!

IT seems every time we look at the contents page we see that this issue has nothing but treats in it, and we seemed to be stuttering a bit in our "mentions" this month. But we can't disregard William P. McGivern's very unusual new yarn, "The Voice." We guarantee you won't put the book down until you've finished it. It's just a sample, though, of what Bill's going to give us in following issues!

(Continued on page 62)

CHILDLESS Wives WHO WISH BABIES!

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Concerning simple way followed at home by which the female organs in relievable functional sterility may be assisted so that motherhood may then so often be easily possible! **YOU AND YOUR HUSBAND MAY LATER THANK THE DAY YOU SENT FOR THIS FREE INFORMATION.** Women from over the Nation write us of their joy in becoming mothers at last! **FOR FREE COPY** write to Warner Co., 322 W. Lake St., Minneapolis, Minnesota.

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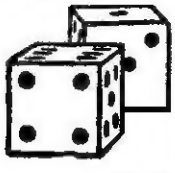

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In both armies the key men are the non-coms and officers—those better trained, more capable. In the fighting army, these are called corporals, sergeants, lieutenants, captains—in the factory and plant, they are the foremen, superintendents, inspectors. In both, these leaders are more important, have greater prestige, are better paid.

The millions of men who have poured into the new and enlarged shops and production lines need thousands of new leaders to guide and supervise them. The old leaders are not nearly enough. Thousands, tens of thousands, must be developed quickly.

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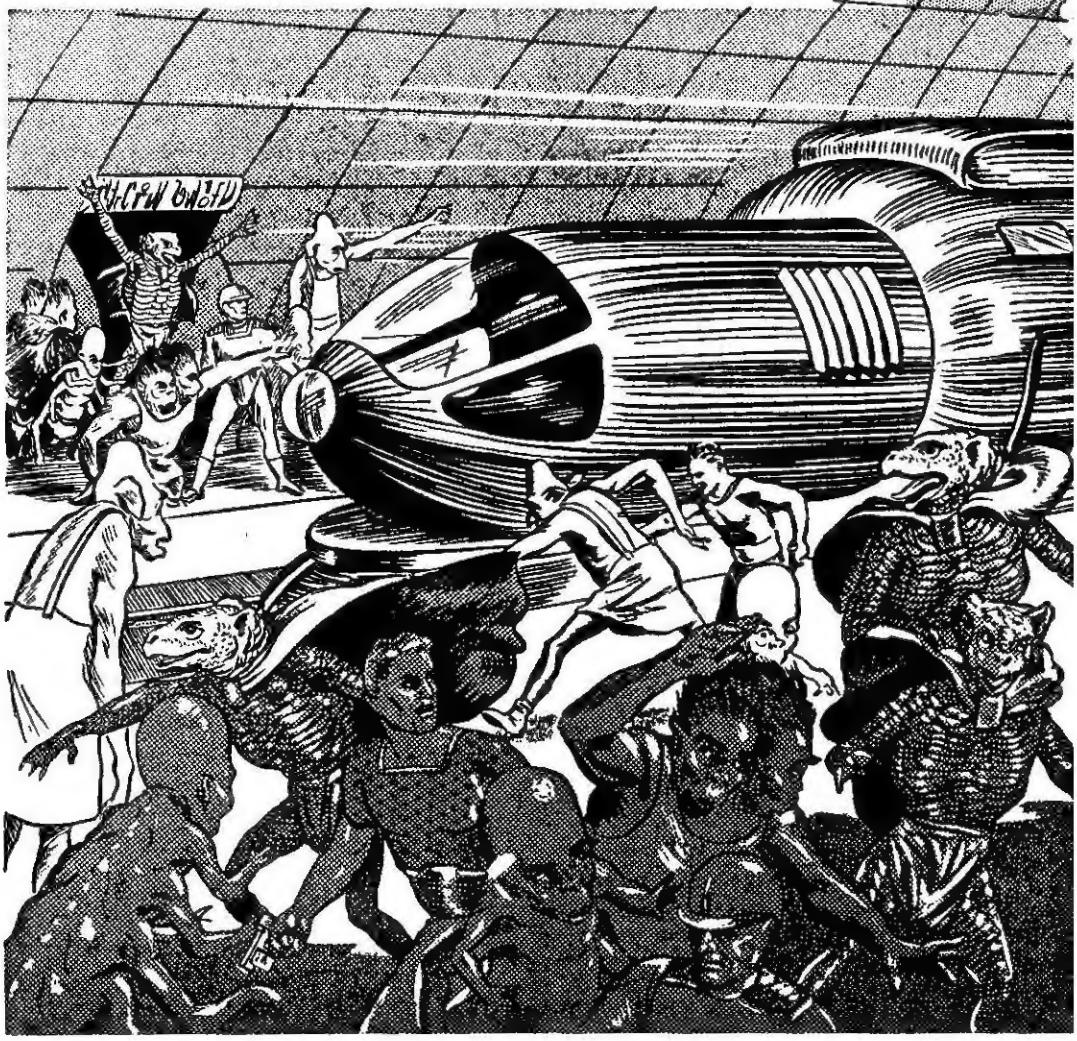
CRUSADE ACROSS THE VOID

"Scum of the spaceways," the interplanetary police called them, but when they fought for justice, they were one blood with the crusaders!

by DWIGHT V. SWAIN



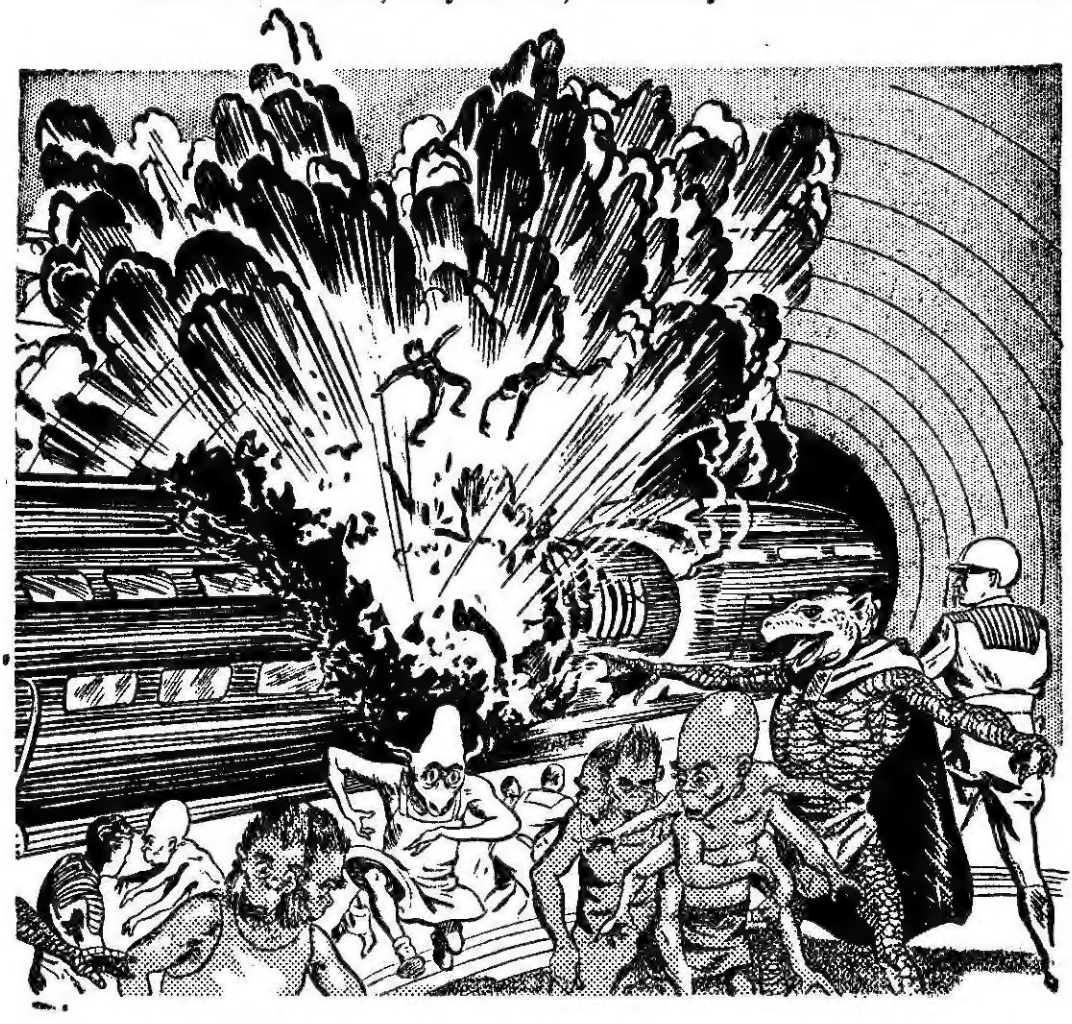
Men of all planets scattered as the trains collided with an awful roar

THEY dragged the *Ghost's* ruffian crew straight from the hospital laboratories to Tela's great Tribunal Hall.

A strange, wild lot, these raiders—Lizard men of Mars, scaly-skinned, basilisk-eyed, lightning fast; killers as ruthless as cobras, and dreaded from Pluto to Mercury. Shambling, eight-armed Venusians—mechanical geniuses all, deft-fingered and with warm, intelligent eyes. Hard-jawed Earthmen, eternal adventurers of the universe. Saturnians: hairy, chinless, ape-like creatures; two-headed; dull of mind but mightily muscled.

"Scum of the spaceways," the Interplanetary Police called them. "Dregs of the void."

But all fighting men. Roving the vastnesses of a whole solar system as recklessly as Earth's buccaneers prowled the Spanish Main a thousand years before them. From a dozen planets they came—outlaws, rebels, fugitives, drawn together in a brotherhood of booty by one man's will.



That man stood with them, now.

Lean he was, and tall. Brown as the sands of Mercury's sun-scorched wastes. An atavar, crowned with a shock of coal-black hair that marked

his blood kinship to some long-dead Comanche chieftain.

Heedless of the *doloid* gyves that shackled him hand and foot, he elbowed his way to the forefront of his captive band.

Earth's vikings had willed him eyes as cold and pale and blue as the ice of their homeland's glaciers. Now, defiant and unflinching, he met the baleful, red-eyed glare of the Lundars' giant *gar*.

"You *chitzas!*" thundered the chalky Goliath on the Tribunal's throne. "Who are you? Whence come you? What can you say for yourselves?"

The freebooters' lean leader glanced up unconcernedly at the *vocodor* translating device that gave all men a universe of discourse. He surveyed the great, chill hall, with its gleaming metal walls and its echoing fastnesses. He saw the grim, silent guards, every man twelve pallid feet of rigid discipline. Noted the heavy, unfamiliar pistols which hung low on their hips.

At last he brought his attention back, again to stare, unawed, at the weird, hairless faces of the enthroned Lundar ruler and the aides who flanked him.

The gar hunched forward menacingly, eyes like pools of blood standing out in sharp contrast to the fish-belly white of his skin.

"Well?" he roared. "Answer, you *starbo!*"

The space-rover's thin lips twisted in a contemptuous sneer. When he spoke, his tone was as arrogant as the gar's.

"Who asks us?" he challenged. "Who calls Wolf Stone and his men to account for themselves?" And then, with special, deadly emphasis: "Who *dares* to do it?"

THE twelve-foot ogre on the throne sprang erect.

"I'll have you flayed alive!" he raged. "You'll pray for death—"

"—in the pits of Ra!" finished the Lundar closest beside him. "Indeed they will, Rsk!"

The gar spun on his aide.

"Who asked you, Znz?" he snarled. "You're not yet gar. When I need your advice, I'll ask it."

The Lundar called Znz shrank back into a silence that crawled with fury.

Rsk, the gar, again faced the prisoners.

"You'll learn," he said. "When first we Lundars took Tela, there were many like you here. But now they keep quiet enough—"

"No doubt," Wolf Stone retorted. "But remember, Erk—or whatever your name is—, you may find us different. Others have—"

"I'll make you crawl!" the Lundar monarch fumed. "My men shall torture you until you beg for death!"

The buccaneer leader's eyes were like blue diamonds.

"We came in peace," he said tightly. "We came a thousand light years across the void from another solar system, our lives suspended in frozen sleep. We hoped, here, to find a welcome.

"But instead, your space ships intercepted ours before the time we were scheduled to waken. Because we were asleep, you didn't have any trouble capturing us. You brought us here. Revived us as prisoners—"

"I thought you'd change your tune," the gar snarled. "Now that you understand I mean what I say, you're crawling already, you *chitza!*"

"No. Not crawling." Wolf Stone shook his head. A mirthless smile played on his thin lips. "No, Rsk. Just giving warning. That's all.

"You say you'll break us. Well, maybe you will. But you'd be wiser to kill us now."

The pirate's smile broadened to a wolfish grin.

"Because, if you don't kill us, you chalk-faced zombie, we'll certainly kill you!" he cried. "If you miss even one of us, may whatever gods you pray to have mercy on your soul!"

"Silence, you fool—!"

"Kill us now, or we'll kill you later, Rsk!" the lean marauder taunted on, heedless of the giant's wrath. "We'll hunt you down like a rabid *zaroff!* We'll cut you to pieces and leave you to welter in whatever rotten bug-juice it is that fills your veins!"

"Silence!"

The Earthman laughed in the screaming gar's face.

"It's a promise, Rsk!" he shouted. "Wolf Stone's promise! Kill us now, you dog, or we'll see you in hell—"

The Lundar was shaking as with ague. "Take them away!" he shrieked. "Take them away! They'll die by inches—"

BUT all the gar's wild fury could not touch the free-booter chief. He was still mocking the ogrish monarch as the guards dragged him and his band from the hall.

"A short life and a merry one, men!" he cried as they were shoved aboard a subway train far below Tela's surface. "That dough-faced Nero called us in to read us our death warrants. But we gave him his own, instead!"

"You think it was smart, though, chief?"

It was the *Ghost's* first mate, Ivar, the band's lone member from Jupiter. He stood a good eight inches taller than his commander's six feet, and outweighed him by a hundred pounds—all of it bone and muscle. He was typical of his race: a hideous, hairless Cyclops, surveying the world through a single, staring eye in the center of his forehead. Four mighty arms made him a dangerous man in any fight, while his bullet head concealed a surprising amount of good sense. And, above all, he worshipped Wolf Stone.

"Smart?" said Wolf. "What do you mean?"

"To roil up this guy, Rsk, so, chief. Like as not he'll give us the ax right now."

The buccaneer leader nodded. "That's right, Ivar. He probably will." The blue eyes flashed. "But no man rides rough-shod over Wolf Stone or Wolf Stone's men, Ivar. Not in this solar system or any other. Die we may, but we'll do it with our heads up, not whining."

"Maybe you're right," the big mate muttered dubiously.

"What else could I do? He was looking for trouble. He was treating us like dogs. No matter what I'd have said, he'd have condemned us. So I decided we might as well shock him a little."

"Shock him!" snorted Ivar. "I'll say you shocked him. I'll bet my pearl-handled ray gun against a bolt of lightning the guy ain't had such a kick in the teeth since the Milky Way went sour." A pause. "Though I got no urge to let these twelve-foot pixies waltz me around if I can help it. Not with Execution Dock for a Maypole."

A broad grin of sheer amusement split Wolf's brown face. Ivar's language was better than any *televo* comic going. Then he sobered.

"We're not dead yet, Ivar," he reminded grimly. "It's one thing to catch us; another to hang on long enough to kill us. The Interplanetary Police can refresh your memory on that, in case you've forgotten."

It was the big mate's turn to grin.

"Yeah," he agreed. "Our outfit don't kill easy. I been condemned so many

times now, myself, that I cast a shadow like a gallows. But I guess I wasn't never good enough to die young."

The train jarred to a stop and the guards herded the outlaws into a bleak station, then down a long corridor. At its end was a massive metal door.

"I don't need no X-ray eyes to know there's a jail on the other side of that slab," Ivar grunted.

His chief favored him with a cold grin. "'Stone walls do not a prison make, nor iron bars a cage,'" he quoted mockingly. "At least, not for Wolf Stone. Remember, Ivar, if one man can build a jail, another can break it!"

THE mate's prediction proved correct. In a matter of minutes the *Ghost's* entire crew was being rigorously searched, put through a routine of registration, and hurried into a huge bull-pen cell.

The enclosure already had several occupants. Obviously of a different race than the Lundars, they looked much like Earthmen, and were about the same size, although their skins had the same greyish pallor as did their giant rulers. All were dressed in rags, and many were gaunt from hunger. Though intelligent in appearance, there was a broken, despondent air about them. They stared up at the space raiders with somber eyes.

"What a bunch of whipped dogs!" growled Ivar. "You'd think they were on their way to their own funerals."

Wolf Stone nodded. "Right. And maybe that's it. Maybe all of us are scheduled for our last trip out." He surveyed the dull doloid walls of their prison. Strode across to test the set of the bars cutting them off from the corridor; they were discouragingly solid.

"No windows," commented Ivar sourly, "so we can't make a break that way, like we did on Neptune."

"It's not the getting out that worries me," Wolf said. "It's what we'd do afterward. None of us has even seen the surface of this planet. We wouldn't know which way to go. Like as not, we'd run right into a bunch of these Lundars who seem to run things around here. And that would be the last of us."

"Yeah. They'd burn us up like magnesium targets."

"What we need," Wolf went on, "is a guide—"

"You want guides, did you say?"

The two buccaneer leaders whirled. Close beside them stood one of the original occupants of the bull pen. He was a stocky, well-knit young man with a handsome face. And despite the rags in which he was clad, there was, somehow, a commanding air about him. He lacked the dejection of his fellows. A spark of spirit still burned in his eyes.

"What—?"

"I have a pocket vocodor," the young man explained, pulling aside the remains of his shirt to reveal the instrument's disc. "It was granted me when a few Bans were held here, so that I could act as translator—"

"Bans?"

"Primitives from Suorz. They were taken off to Ra nearly a month ago, just as we shall be tomorrow—"

"Wait." Wolf silenced the other. "Let's get things straight. Just what's going on?"

The young man looked perplexed. "I do not understand. Where are you from, that you do not know the doings of the Lundars?"

THE space pirate's blue eyes searched the young man's brown ones. For a long moment he scruti-

nized him weighing all he saw. Then:

"All right. I'll tell you. We're all in jail together, so I can't see that it'll do any harm.

"I'm Wolf Stone. The last of the space raiders—"

"Space raiders?"

"Pirates. Brigands. Outlaws. We held up space freighters for a living. Raided some of the biggest cities in the solar system. A few times we even knocked off whole asteroids."

"Oh. I see." The young man nodded.

"But finally," Wolf went on, "the Interplanetary Police got us holed up on a planetoid near Pluto. They hemmed us in 'til I saw we didn't have a chance in a trillion to get through their lines—"

"This name—" the other broke in, "it is not familiar. Where is this Pluto?"

Ivar snorted in disgust. "Give Wolf a chance to tell you, dope. It's in another solar system. Pluto's the planet farthest out—three-and-a-half billion miles from the sun."

"Yes," the commander continued. "You see, I figured we were just as well as dead. Then our scientist—he's a Uranian—got an idea. He said we should leave the solar system—go out across the void instead of back toward the sun. Then, by setting our unipilots on a charted course for another solar system—"

"But you would die!" expostulated the young man. "No one could live all the hundreds of light years necessary to cross the void from one system to another. It is impossible—"

"But we did it. The Interplanetary Police didn't think that even Wolf Stone would be damned fool enough to leave the system, so they'd only put a skimpy patrol out beyond Pluto. We slipped through like a mosquito through a fish-net.

"Then our scientist put us all in frozen sleep, timed to wake up at the moment when, according to his figures, we'd be in the middle of this universe. Only the Lundars captured the *Ghost*—that's our ship—before we came out of the fog. They revived us in a hospital and took us to a tough customer named Rsk. He sent us here. And that's all we know." A moment's pause. "Now you take it up from there."

The other shook his head as in a daze. "It seems incredible!" he said half-aloud.

Ivar cut him short. "We're here, ain't we?" he grunted. "So quit slobbering about it and angle the set-up for us."

"Yes. Of course." Their new friend smiled. Then: "This planet is called Tela. It is one of the four important ones in our solar system. The people who inhabit Tela are called Daus. I am one of them.

"Always there had been peace in our universe. Then, a few years ago, the Lundars—they come from Virna—struck at us; conquered us. They have made us their slaves."

"But how?" demanded Wolf, his eyes cold and calculating. "They don't look too tough to me—"

THE other smiled sadly. "We knew little of war," he explained. "Besides, the Lundars had discovered a source of power so great as to be beyond belief. They discovered that the third planet of our system, Ra, was nothing but a great lump of a radioactive ore which their scientists converted into pure energy practically without processing. They broadcast this power to their war fleet. We were beaten."

"So that's it." The buccaneer chief was sober. "No hope at all?"

"None. Until recently the Princess Meersa and I kept up a guerrila fight. But we were captured, and now these" —he nodded toward his fellow-Daus —"the last of our fighters, lie here in prison, awaiting transfer to Ra."

"Why Ra?"

"Always the Lundars need men for Ra. The workers there die from contact with the ore within six months. A horrible death, in agony. That is why Ra is used as a penal station."

"I see." Wolf frowned. And, after a pause: "What's your name, friend?"

"Orcutt."

"Well, Orcutt, have you got any ideas on where the *Ghost* might be? It's a big ship—big enough to carry all my men, and yours beside, so there ought not to be too many landing fields big enough to take it."

The other meditated for a moment.

"I think I have it," he declared at last. "Probably the Lundars have put it in the great central port."

"Where's that?"

"It is close to the Tribunal Hall. A half-hour through the tube."

"Will you guide us there?"

Orcutt nodded. "Yes, gladly. But" —he shook his head—"it is little use to talk about it. This prison is strong, and the Lundars are many. We could never get away."

Wolf Stone's eyes flashed blue flame. His thin face was hard.

"The prison isn't built that can hold my band!" he clipped. He turned. "Ivar!"

"Here, Chief!" The big mate moved close.

The leader's eyes were once again probing the prison. Taking in every detail. Searching for the smallest weakness.

"We'll have to go out the same way we came in," he decided at last in a low voice.

"Back past them cops?" His aide looked shocked. "Chief, them Lunkers, or whatever you call 'em, ain't wearin' guns for ornaments."

The buccaneer leader gripped one of Ivar's arms. "Of course they're not ornaments. They've got them to shoot unruly prisoners like us with. But do you remember the break we made at Horosha, on Mercury?"

A slow grin spread across the mate's ugly face. "Do I remember!" he smirked. "Whoee! And I'll bet everyone on Mercury does, too."

Then, turning to Orcutt:

"How about it, buddy? Do these dopes have any kind of an alarm system to warn 'em that birds like us is trying to fly away?"

It took the young Dau a minute to digest the Jupiterian's unique phrasing of the question. Then he nodded.

"Yes. Any break in the walls, or any serious tampering with the bars, sounds a warning bell. That brings all the guards rushing out the door on the other side of the corridor, there. And since we're behind bars, they can kill us at their leisure." He sighed. "One of the bans tried to pry loose one of the wall plates. They burned him down before he could even get his fingers under it."

Ivar's bullet head nodded solemnly. "You called the turn, Wolf," he acknowledged. "They were fishing for sharks with a minnow net when they put us in here."

"Then what are we waiting for?" Wolf Stone demanded, his eyes very hard and bright. "Let's go!"

CHAPTER II

Flight for Freedom

THE stage was set in less than ten minutes. Two heavily thewed Sat-

urnians ripped apart one of the strap-metal bunks which lined the rear of the bull-pen as easily as if it had been made of tinfoil.

A lizard man directed them at their task. When they were finished, he selected the straightest of the metal slats; had them break it in half. They did the job in such a manner that the Martian had a three-foot strip of heavy metal, pointed at one end. A very ugly sort of sword, for close-quarter stabbing.

Slat in hand, the lizard man walked over to a position close beside the bars separating the big cell from the corridor, and a few feet to the right of the point at which the door from the police squad room opened into the opposite side of the hall.

Five Saturnians now gathered at the other end of the bull-pen, several feet to the left of the squad room door. They gripped one of the bars between them and the hallway.

"Stop them!" cried Orcutt. "Don't you understand, Wolf Stone? If they try to pull out that bar, the Lundar guards will shoot them down—"

"Let me worry about it," the raider snapped.

The others of the band were hastily equipping themselves with the remainder of the bunk slats.

Wolf Stone surveyed the scene through narrowed eyes: The Martian, at one end of the cell. The Saturnians, at the other. The remainder of his men, crouched eagerly in the background.

"Ready?"

The lizard man waved his pointed metal slat. "Ai!"

"Uhhh!" chorused the Saturnians.

"Now!"

As one man, the Saturnians heaved. Their great muscles rippled and swelled. Their powerful backs seemed to spread with the strain. But the bar held firm.

Again they heaved, and again. Their horrible, hairy faces twisted with effort. They bared their fangs—

Then, suddenly, like a sapling in the wind, the bar bent inward. Tore loose from its settings.

A hell of clanging bells broke out. The squad room door burst open. A twelve-foot Lundar guard rushed into the corridor, gun in hand. His eyes fastened on the Saturnians.

But before he could so much as raise his weapon, the lizard man behind him, at the other end of the bull-pen, hurled the three-foot metal slat. Like a silver streak, it sped through the air, whistling a song of death. The point drove home between the Lundar's shoulders in a hammer-blow. He staggered. Bent at the knees. Slumped forward, blocking the doorway.

The same instant the bar gave way, another Martian sprang. He leaped across the Saturnians. Through the gap in the bars. Across the hall. His scaly reptilean claw snatched the gun from the Lundar's dying hand. He blazed away with it, criss-crossing the squad room with streaks of purple light. The Lundars' cries changed from roars of rage to screams of panic.

The rest of the *Ghost's* wild crew were swarming out of the cell and into the hall.

THROUGH the doorway they surged, makeshift weapons swinging, faces contorted with grimaces of hate. This was work they knew how to do—killer's work; work for Wolf Stone's raiders!

Wolf himself was in the forefront. He hurled himself forward, drove a long strip of slatting into the pit of a staggering Lundar's stomach with all his might.

"Prisons, Ivar!" he bellowed. "They've not yet made the prison that will hold us!"

And beside him, the mate, a captured light-gun in hand, roared back a savage affirmation.

Close on their former captors' heels, the raiders rushed down the tunnel to the subway station.

But, from one corner of his eye, Wolf caught a glimpse of Orcutt, the Dau, jerking open another of the squad room's doors and disappearing through it. The Earthman stopped short.

"What's he up to?" he muttered half-aloud. "He's supposed to guide us."

For the fraction of a second Wolf hesitated. Then he raced in pursuit of the young Dau.

A long corridor stretched beyond the door through which Orcutt had disappeared. But there was no sign of him. Wolf sped along it. At its end loomed the shadowy black well of a descending staircase. Noiseless as a wraith, the space raider slipped down it.

The stairs ended in a dimly lighted chamber. A door was set in its far side. Before it, Orcut blasted savagely at the lock with a Lundar light gun. Silently hugging the shadows, Wolf watched him work.

A moment later the lock gave way. The heavy portal swung open.

"Orcutt!" cried a voice from the blackness beyond.

"Meersa!"

The next instant the lithe, slender figure of a girl stumbled out of the darkness and into the stocky young Dau's arms. Her pale, lovely face was radiant with joy.

"How did you do it?" she gasped. "Oh, Orcutt, how did you get away?"

Orcutt's voice was choked with emotion. "Meersa, my princess! You are safe!" Then: "All our men are free, saved from the Lundars by strange creatures from another universe. Already they have destroyed the guard squad, and—"

"Look out!"

The girl's voice was shrill with fear. She jerked free from the man's arms. Her hand shot out, whipped the light gun from his grasp. She snapped a shaft of purple brilliance toward the stairs. It missed Wolf's head by inches.

The buccaneer lunged forward in a somersaulting fall that carried him all the way across the chamber. He landed in a heap in a far corner. Took in the scene with one glance.

The Dau princess still stood tense by the door, gun raised, eyes wide with excitement. Orcutt half-crouched close beside her, paralyzed with shock.

And, looming on the stairs like a drunken Frankenstein, tottered the monster figure of a Lundar guard. His red eyes were staring, face twisted in awful surprise, hands clutching at a black cavern that yawned in the center of his chest, where the bolt of light had struck. Even as Wolf watched, the giant went limp. Plunged to the floor.

Orcutt's eyes flashed across the corpse to where the Earthman sprawled.

"Wolf Stone!" he gasped. "How came you here?"

SLOWLY, the buccaneer got to his feet. His blue eyes were centered on the girl, Meersa, drawn to her as filings to a magnet. Ignoring the young Dau's query, he approached her.

"You saved my life," he said gruffly.

Tela's princess gazed up at his lean face. "I cannot claim credit," she said. "I was thinking of myself, and of Orcutt. I saw the Lundar even before I realized you were in the shadows. My shooting was instinctive."

Then, to Orcutt:

"But who is this man? Whence does

he come? I do not recognize him, nor his race."

"He is Wolf Stone," the stocky Dau explained. "He is the one of whom I told you—the creature from another universe who released us all from the Lundars' grasp—"

But the space raider's eyes still were riveted on the girl. "You saved my life," he repeated. "One step more and that thing"—he jerked his head toward the corpse—"would have killed me. He must have played dead when my men passed through the squad room, then followed me when I came after Orcutt."

"It is nothing," murmured the Princess Meersa.

A grim smile rippled over Wolf's thin lips.

"Nothing?" he mocked. "My life is nothing? Princess, to me it is everything! I have fought my way through a sea of blood to preserve it.

"But now it is mine no longer. You have saved it, so it is yours."

There was a fierce intensity in his tone that made the girl's breath come faster. She dropped her eyes.

"Please—" she whispered. "I ask no credit—"

The Earthman said: "My life is yours. I must redeem it."

"No—"

"Yes!" Blue fire danced in the raider's eyes. "I'll buy back my life on my own terms." His jaw was hard. "Hear me, Princess! From this moment on, your fight is my fight. The Lundars have been your enemies; now they are mine! I'll stand with you 'til they are but a memory. It is a promise, Princess! Wolf Stone's promise!"

Orcutt said: "We are wasting time. Soon the alarm will spread. More of the Lundars will be rushed here to seize us."

His words seemed to break the Earthman's spell. He turned.

"Right. Come on."

Together, the three hurried up the stairs and down the corridor to the squad room. Half-way there they met Ivar, running toward them.

"We been hunting for you like a Plutonian for trouble," he greeted his chief. "We was scared one of them zombies had sunk a ax in the back of your neck."

"Not yet," Wolf grinned. "What's doing?"

An unpleasant, mirthless smile lit up the big mate's face. "They tried to run," he chuckled. "Them big dopes tried to run. But we shot faster."

A FEW minutes later they were entering the subway station. Raiders and Daus alike were milling about nervously. Lundar bodies littered the platform. Several others were strewn along the tracks, some of them burned beyond recognition through falling against third rails apparently similar to those used by early Earth underground systems.

Meersa saw them. "Oh!" she choked.

Ivar shrugged. "Don't worry about 'em. They was out to kill us, only we got 'em first."

"That isn't what she means," burst out Orcutt. "Don't you see? Anything falling across those rails causes a short circuit. It warns Rsk's headquarters that something's wrong up here. They'll send out a squad to find out."

"Then it's time we got moving," snapped Wolf.

"Yes," spoke up Meersa. "We can go down the tracks. The last station is in the foothills. From it we can escape into the mountains. We can hide there."

"No," said Wolf Stone.

"What?"

"No, we're not going to hide." The buccaneer's blue eyes danced with a daredevil light. "That's what the Lundars expect us to try. If we do it, they can hunt us down at their leisure."

"But what else can we do?" demanded Orcutt, puzzled.

Wolf laughed harshly.

"We can attack!" he cried. "We can do the thing they least expect. We can put *them* on the defensive."

"You mean—?"

"We're goin' back. Back to the central port you told me about, where the *Ghost's* stored." He turned to his mate. "Ivar!"

"Sure, Chief!"

"Scout around. See if there's any way we can get back to that shiny mausoleum of Rsk's—"

The big man from Jupiter grinned like a delirious sculptor's gargoyle. "We already done it, Chief," he announced. "Some of them goons run off down that siding"—he jerked one of his four brawny arms toward a narrow passage into which a spur of track ran—"but me and a few of the boys lighted their way for 'em." He slapped the light gun in his belt in grim significance.

"When we caught up to 'em," he then concluded, "we saw they'd been trying to make it to that little train we come down on. It's there now."

Wolf's eyes flashed back to Orcutt. "Can you pilot the things?"

The Dau nodded. "My men can."

"All right. Let's go."

Daus and raiders alike swarmed aboard the underground train. The men of Tela no longer looked broken and dejected. The swashbuckling, reckless spirit of the buccaneers had communicated itself to them. They moved now with hands up, eyes glowing with excitement.

Half a dozen lizard men scrambled onto the train's head end, their scaly claws gripping weapons. A Dau, directed by Orcutt, took the controls. The vehicle jerked forward. Gained speed. Careened down the blackness of the tunnel, back toward Rsk's Tribunal Hall.

Wolf Stone turned to Meersa. "What is Rsk? Sort of a military governor?"

"No." The Dau princess shook her lovely head. "He is the gar—that is, the king, the ruler—of all the Lundars—"

"But I thought they came from another planet—"

"They do," Meersa nodded. "From Virna. But it is far out from our sun. Tela, our own planet, is more centrally located. That is why the Lundars have made it their capitol, the place from which they rule our whole solar system."

"Fine rulers!" snarled Wolf. "The way they treated us—"

THE princess of Tela smiled sadly. "They treat my people worse," she said. "The Lundars believe themselves to be a superior race. The more so since the happenstance of their planet's development resulted in them being twice our size. They see in my people only serfs—dirt under their feet. They kill ruthlessly. They delight in torture. In the glory of their power, they see might as the only right—"

Wolf Stone's eyes were dark. "I've seen such before," he said. "If it had not been for their likes, I might never have come to Tela." There was an almost cruel twist to his lips. "Well, if force is the only language they can understand, that's the one we'll talk to them. And believe me, princess, my men and I are fluent in it. . . ."

"Chief! Trouble!"

It was big Ivar's harsh voice. The

Earthman sprang to his side.

They were coming into a familiar station—the station below Rsk's great Tribunal Hall. The platform thronged with Lundars. All were armed.

"It's the party being sent down to see what is wrong at the prison!" shouted Orcutt.

"Keep moving, then!" roared Wolf. "Don't stop here. Get on up to the next station before they start shooting!"

The train picked up speed. But barely in time. Light guns already were out and blasting at them.

"They're coming, chief!" Ivar bellowed. "They got another train. They're on our tails."

Wolf caught Orcutt's arm. "Hurry up! Get more speed out of this thing!"

"It is going as fast as it can now."

The raider chief turned. He could see the glowing headlight of the pursuing train, speeding along directly behind them.

"Where's the next station?"

"Just beyond the central port."

"How long before we hit it?"

"Another minute. No more."

"Men!" Wolf roared.

The babble of strange tongues ceased as if it had been cut off with a knife.

"In another forty seconds we stop. I want every man out onto the platform and ready for a fight before the wheels quit spinning!"

The Earthman spun back on Orcutt. "Does this outfit have a reverse?"

The Dau nodded. "Yes."

"Then tell your man to put it at full speed back the second we stop."

"You mean—?" The stocky man of Tela stared back at the glowing headlight of the pursuing train. Then: "Of course! They are on the same track —"

"Right." Wolf smiled grimly. "I told you my side played rough. These Lundars are in for trouble."

The next instant they pitched forward, thrown off balance by the sudden braking of the vehicle.

"Come on!" Wolf roared.

LIKE magic, the train emptied. Wolf shoved Orcutt and Meersa onto the platform. By the time his own feet hit, the cars were backing faster and faster.

From down the tracks came the scream of brakes.

Ivar said: "Them zombies must of catched on, huh, chief?"

But the Lundars were too late. Already their train was within feet of the other. No force could halt it in time.

Crash!

A hideous cacophony of rending metal and Lundar shrieks shredded the darkness. Then blue flame leaped in balls about the wreck.

"The electricity!" came Princess Meersa's horrified gasp. "It has passed the insulators! It kills them all. Nothing could live through it."

"Come on!" snapped Wolf. "We've got to get to the *Ghost*."

They raced up a long stairway, out of the subway and toward Tela's surface.

Ahead, from the first of the raiders, came sudden shouts of tumult.

"Hurry up!"

Wolf ran ahead. He came out into a strange world of purple and gleaming metal. Buildings of unfamiliar architecture towered all about. It was the raider's first glimpse of this world's outdoors.

But he had no time to stand and contemplate. His men were fighting savagely against the onslaught of a Lundar troop. More of the giants were pouring into the street from a dozen directions.

Orcutt rushed out of the subway tunnel. Wolf caught his arm.

"Where's the port?"

"There. Back there." The Dau pointed toward a monstrous metal heap towering behind them.

The Earthman shouted orders. His crew began falling back, fighting their way toward the structure. They had only one advantage: surrounded as they were by the giant Lundars, they could fire at will with their captured light guns; but their enemies could not, for fear of hitting each other.

With the desperation of the already damned, they hacked their way. A dozen times the force of numbers almost overwhelmed them. Once a Lundar caught Wolf's shoulder, almost broke it before the Earthman could shoot his way free.

And then, miraculously, they were within the gigantic central port before their enemies realized their goal. The great metal doors slid shut. The raiders swarmed to take defensive posts beside the entrances. Others hunted down the handful of Lundars trapped within.

But Wolf and his chief aides raced through the monster building's corridors. Hurried into elevators. Rushed to where the *Ghost* stood empty and idle.

Brief minutes of inspection told the story. Their great, black pirate ship was safe. Ready to take off down the long runway at a moment's notice.

"The jackpot!" whooped the irrepressible Ivar. "The old girl's as frisky as a *zotar* in mating season. All we got to do is let her roll!"

"Then you had better do it!" retorted a lizard man who had just sped up. His lidless eyes sought Wolf. "We are holding them below," he reported tersely. "But they are many. Soon they will break through. We must take off quickly if we are to live to fight again."

But Wolf's face was tense and desperate. He was staring off down the metal runway, and through the exit port beyond.

"How did the *Ghost* get in here?" he grated to Orcutt.

The Dau's face showed bewilderment. "How? Why, through the entrance port at the other end of the building. You take off down this runway—"

"No."

"What—?"

"That building's in the way. The big one down there." The buccaneer leader's blue eyes were sharp with worry.

"But, surely—"

"Your ships must be smaller and more maneuverable than ours. The *Ghost's* too big ever to make it. And we can't turn it around to go out the same way it came in. It's too big for that, too."

"Then what—?"

Wolf Stone drew a deep breath. "Nothing. Orcutt, we're trapped. We fought our way here, and now—we can't get out. The Lundars have got us!"

CHAPTER III

Enter Znz

THERE was a long moment of stunned silence.

At last Princess Meersa spoke. Desperation was in her voice.

"We can't fail now! Not after we've gotten this far. There must be some way—"

Wolf smiled bleakly, ran long, nervous fingers through his Indian-black hair.

"Sure," he agreed, "there's a way.

There always is. The only question is: can we find it in time, before those devils outside break through and cut our throats?"

Ivar's voice broke in like an exclamation point. "Wolf!"

The raider chief spun about. His big Jupiterian mate had gone off with the lizard man in charge of the defenses. Now he was running back.

"We ain't got enough to hold 'em, Wolf," he gasped out. "Them palefaces has gotten in. They keep coming, just like a bunch of them black beetles on Mercury, that even fire can't stop."

"They've gotten in!" The other's lean face was drawn and tense. "What—"

"The boys have fallen back. We're holding 'em in this section, on the second level. But that ain't going to be long. They keep coming, Wolf. They just keep coming—"

Like a caged lion, Wolf paced the floor. Then:

"Where's Moko, our scientist?"

"Down below," grunted the mate. "The last I saw of him, he was playing tit-tat-toe on one of them zombies with a light gun."

"Get him up here, then. And send along a bunch of Venusians."

"You got an idea, chief?"

"Half a one. Hurry up!"

Seconds later the stooped figure of the raiders' Uranian scientist hurried down the runway toward the spot where Meersa, Orcutt, and Wolf stood beside the *Ghost*. Close on his heels were half a dozen of the weird-appearing mechanics of the crew, eight-armed Venusians.

"Yes, yes?" sputtered Moko, the purple beard which covered the top half of his face twitched nervously, while his bright little eyes darted this way and that. "What is it, Wolf? What do you want?"

"We've got to get the *Ghost* out of here," the leader reported tersely. "That building down there is in the way, though. So we'll have to turn the ship around and go out the same way we came in."

"Yes, yes. Go on."

"To turn the ship, we'll have to tear the guts out of this whole section of the port. Can we do it?"

The Uranian scurried off down the runway. He shot glances from one side of the monster hangar to the other. Glanced hurriedly at the structural network overhead. For perhaps a minute he studied the problem. At last he returned to Wolf.

"No. Can't do it."

"What do you mean, can't? Why not?"

"Hmph!" The little scientist snorted. "Can't you see? Cut out enough of the bracing to give space to turn the *Ghost* around and the whole place would cave in. Architecture reminds me of Pluto. All part of a unit. Pull out one piece and the whole thing falls down."

THE buccaneer chief bit his thin lip hard. "We've got to figure an angle. We've got to get out—fast!"

"Chief!" Again Ivar rushed up. "We've had to fall back to the third level. And now they're bringing up some big outfits that look like artillery to me—"

"Atom projectors!" choked Orcutt. "They throw bolts of energy. Nothing can withstand them. But that they do such damage, and that the Lundars are so proud of this great port building, no doubt they would have used them before. One blast, from the biggest projectors, and this whole place would be a mass of smouldering ashes!"

"Maybe we could do some blasting, too, chief!" Ivar suggested. He waved one of his four brawny arms at the

Ghost. "Why don't we use our proton cannons on that there building that's in our way? We could blow it from here to Neptune—"

"Nonsense!" broke in Moko the Uranian peevishly. "At close range, yes. But that building's too far off. We wouldn't even damage it. Not from here."

"Wolf Stone!" cried Meersa. "I have an idea!"

"What is it?"

"Why don't we abandon your ship? We can escape in the Lundars' space freighters—"

"We cannot, Meersa," interrupted Orcutt. "They no longer dock freighters here. Only a fleet of little aerocars do they keep here. They are good only on Tela, you know. They cannot go beyond the stratosphere."

Little Moko, the scientist, skittered about nervously.

"If only we had explosives!" he fretted. "We could load the aerocars and pilot them by radio over to that building. That would get it out of the way."

Wolf Stone stopped short. A flash of sudden enthusiasm — of hope — drove the worry from his blue eyes.

"That's it!" he cried.

"No. No." Moko was adamant. "We haven't any explosives, Wolf. If we had, yes. But we haven't."

"We don't need explosives—"

A lizard man rushed up. "More than a few minutes more we cannot hold, Wolf Stone!" he reported, his cold voice tense. "Already the Lundars have inflicted heavy losses. Now they hurl bolts of power at us. We cannot retreat much farther—"

The lean pirate chief turned on Ivar.

"Quick!" he snapped harshly. "Line up every aerocar in the place for a fast flight to that building."

He whirled to Moko.

"Get the radio directional apparatus ready. Hurry!"

"But we haven't any explosives—"

"I know it. Do as I say now. You can argue later."

Then, to the Martian:

"And you: get the men ready for a fast run up here. Tell them to board the *Ghost* and prepare for action."

Tela's princess, close beside him, stared up in puzzlement. "I do not understand," she said.

But the *Ghost's* commander paid her no heed. A dynamo of energy, blue eyes afire, he snapped curt orders right and left to the crew members who now hurried about him.

IVAR panted up, sweat pouring from every pore. "I got 'em ready, chief! Orcutt's turning 'em on now. They got no power plants, you know. Pick their juice right out of the air from this Ra place. So I ain't had to worry about that."

"Right." Wheeling, the other ran up the *Ghost's* ladder to where Moko was working. "How much longer?"

"Nearly ready now," fluttered the Uranian, brushing wisps of purple beard back out of his eyes. "Another minute. That's all. Be all ready to pilot those aerocars wherever you want them to go. But no explosives. It's silly, without explosives—"

Wolf ran back out of the space ship.

"Ivar!"

"Here, chief!"

"Get below. The second the men get a breathing spell, have them abandon their posts. Get them up here. Every last man of them."

"You bet, chief. On the nose." The big mate lumbered off.

Wolf hesitated long enough to flash Meersa a thin smile.

"If you know any prayers," he told her, "now's the time to say 'em. If my scheme works, we'll live to harass the

Lundars from one end of your solar system to the other. If it doesn't—well, lady, you'll never live to worry about it."

"But what—"

Before the buccaneer could answer, the *Ghost's* crew came across the port floor in a rush. Into the ship they poured.

"Moko! Have you got that radio directional apparatus ready?"

"Yes, yes. All ready. But you can't—"

"Ivar!"

From the rear of the motley band swarming into the *Ghost* came the mate's ready, "Here, chief!"

"All aboard?"

"Yeah. All on. But we got to do whatever we're going to fast. Them Loonies'll catch on that we ain't down there fighting in another second—"

"Close the hatches!" Wolf shouted. "Prepare for flight!"

The space ship's sound detectors caught the tumult of Lundar shouts from the abandoned barricades below.

"See!" growled Ivar. "They're wise already. No dust on their tails, may they rot!"

Wolf Stone's cold blue eyes stabbed at Moko the Uranian.

"Take off those aerocars!" he clipped. "Set them down on the roof-field of that old building that's in our way. In regular formation, as if they were loaded to the ailerons with men."

"But what good—"

"Do it!" Wolf roared. "Don't argue! Do it! Now!" His voice was like a lash of flame.

The Uranian hunched over the maze of radio equipment. He twisted dials, threw levers.

INTO the *Ghost's* telescreen—sighted on the building which loomed black against the sky at the far end of the runway—came myriad forms, like squads of tiny insects maneuvering. They moved toward the building.

Through the sound detectors came the Lundars' wild shrieks of rage.

The next instant half a dozen of the little aerocars burst in mid-flight like clay pigeons.

"The atom-projectors!" cried Orcutt. "They're not afraid to use them now."

The raider chief paid him no heed. "Now!" he cried. "Hurry, Moko! Bring them down on the roof."

Like swallows, the aerocars swooped down, precisely obedient to the little scientist's manipulations of the radio directional equipment. One after another, they landed.

"Now! Watch!" Wolf grated.

Almost at the same moment, it happened.

Like a house of cards crumpling, one corner of the big building that barred the *Ghost's* way vanished. Faster, faster, it disintegrated. Its weather-scarred surface caved under an invisible bombardment. Then, with a rending crash, one whole side gave way. The entire structure tottered perilously for a moment. Hung on the verge of complete collapse. Let go at last. Crumbled into a heap of smouldering ashes.

"Take off!" roared Wolf Stone. "Set a course for outer space!"

His words were still echoing through the control room's confines as the great ship blasted down the runway, out of the port, and off over Tela's sprawling capital city.

Ivar, eyes still bulging with amazement, stared at his commander.

"I don't get it, chief," he complained dolefully. "One minute that big shanty was as solid as the mountains of Jupiter. The next, it was caving in like it was made of fog and soapsuds."

Wolf smiled thinly.

"It's just as I told you, Ivar," he ex-

plained. "There's always a way out, if you can only think of it. This time, it was aerocars and atom projectors. Moko gave me the idea when he spoke of blasting that building with explosives—only we didn't have any.

"Then it hit me. I saw that if we flew that fleet of aerocars over to the other building, the Lundars would blast the whole place out of the way. Especially since it was an old building. They'd already gotten so desperate they were using small projectors even back there in the central port, which they certainly *didn't* want to destroy."

"Uh . . . I don't get it yet, chief. Why'd they go off their nuts about them empty hacks?"

"OF ALL the thick-headed apes!" the leader exploded. "Ivar, you Jupiterian jackass, the Lundars thought we were in those aerocars. That's why I timed the take-off so carefully. What would you think, if someone you were fighting disappeared, and a minute later a ship just around the corner took off? We were all here, in the *Ghost,* with the hatches closed. So the Lundars figured—just like anyone would—that we were running for it."

"But how could you be sure?" broke in Meersa. "How could you know that they'd destroy that building, instead of storming it, the way they did this one?"

The Earthman shrugged. There was a reckless twist to the corners of his mouth.

"I couldn't know," he answered. "It was just a gamble that worked. Just a putting of myself in the Lundars' place—figuring how I'd feel if someone I thought I'd trapped made a clean getaway. It made them jittery. They wanted to swat us, hard and fast. And the quickest way was to blow the whole building out of the universe—"

The lovely Dau princess nodded. "Yes. I can see it, now. You are a clever man, Wolf Stone—"

The buccaneer nodded, in his turn. "I'd be lying if I denied it," he told her grimly. "The only reason I'm alive is that I've been clever enough to dodge a hundred traps. When a space pirate keeps his head on his shoulders, it's proof he's clever."

"And now—?"

The raider's eyes were almost dreamy.

"Now," he answered, "we give Rsk, gar of the Lundars, the worst headache he's had since he quit making mud pies and throwing snowballs.

"Already," he went on, grinning wolfishly and running his thin fingers through the heavy black hair that crowned his head, "we've disturbed his peace of mind a bit, I imagine. One day after we recover consciousness, we stage a successful mass jailbreak." He chuckled. "That's the stuff nervous breakdowns are made of."

"What do we do first?" Orcutt demanded enthusiastically.

"We establish a base. Some spot we can work from. A place we can fortify—"

"I know just the place!" cried the Dau. "It is a small asteroid, a satellite of Suorz. The Lundars fortified it during their war against the primitives who inhabit Suorz, but by now they must have withdrawn all but a small garrison. If we capture it, we can use the long-range atom projectors they mounted there to fight them off—"

"Just the place!"

A Saturnian shambled in.

"Big space freighter off our bow," he mumbled in the strange, guttural speech of his people. "The Daus say it's a Lundar ship."

Again Wolf grinned. "Sorry, friends," he announced, "but this means changing our plans. We'll have to postpone

setting up a base until we can clean up a business transaction — something involving the cargo of a Lundar freighter."

THEY were mad days, those that followed. Days that saw the *Ghost* cruising from one end of the solar system to the other, hovering over every Lundar like a hawk above a coopful of chickens. Days when Rsk's battle cruisers swarmed the spaceways in vain, searching for an enemy they could never find. Days that brought terror to the farthest Lundar outpost, and fear of raiders even to Virna, the giants' home planet.

Days in which Wolf Stone showed why Interplanetary Police reward posters had termed him the most dangerous pirate who ever roamed the void.

One lightning attack gave the buccaneers the asteroid Orcutt had described. The *Ghost's* proton cannons blasted three-quarters of the garrison to oblivion even before the Lundars realized they were being attacked, and the rest went down under a single swift, savage rush. From that day on, the raiders had an almost impregnable base from which to operate.

But Wolf Stone was not satisfied.

"Yes," he told Meersa, Orcutt, and Ivar one day after a particularly successful attack on Tela, "we're causing a lot of trouble. But that isn't enough. The Lundars are getting better organized, now. They're tightening their patrols. Hemming us in a little closer all the time. Sooner or later the day will come when we can't send the *Ghost* out." He paced the floor, his face grim with worry. "We've got to figure out something bigger. Something that will paralyze the Lundars—"

"But every raid brings us new recruits from the oppressed peoples," Meersa objected. "We know that they would revolt if they could—"

"But they can't!" Wolf snapped back savagely. "They want to, but as long as the Lundars have the arms, no one can fight back. And our raids are not much beyond nuisance value, now." He shook his head. "No. We're wearing ourselves out, yet we haven't really accomplished anything when it comes to cracking Rsk's regime."

"Oh, but—"

The princess's sentence was never finished. A Martian lizard man burst into the room, cutting her off.

"Lundar cruiser approaching, sir!" he snapped to Wolf. "They're flashing truce signals."

"Truce?" The buccaneer frowned. "That doesn't make sense."

"But that's what they're doing, sir. It looks like they're coming in for a landing."

There was a long moment of tense silence. Then:

"Put one of the Daus who talks Lundar on the interspacial radio. Have him warn them that they'll be blown out of the sky the instant they try anything funny."

"Yes, sir."

THE Martian hurried away, while Wolf crossed the room to a telescreen.

Sure enough, a Lundar ship was bearing down on them.

"It's one of Rsk's personal cruisers!" cried Orcutt excitedly.

Meersa's enthusiasm equalled that of her stocky aide. "Maybe he wants to arrange a peace!" she suggested breathlessly. "Maybe his nerves are cracking—"

"No." Wolf shook his head. "It couldn't be that. After all, what peace terms can you make with a pirate? Certainly he's not going to agree to free all the planets he's seized. Yet that's

obviously the only solution, so far as we're concerned."

"They're landing, chief!" Ivar broke in. "Some guy is getting out. Must be a big shot, too. He's wearing enough medals to build an aerocar."

Again the door opened, and the lizard man stepped in.

"A visitor, sir," he told the leader. "An envoy from the Lundars."

"Not Rsk, is it?" demanded Wolf.

"No, sir. It's his aide, the sub-gar."

"The sub-gar!" gasped Meersa and Orcutt in chorus. There was horror in their eyes.

Then:

"Not even Rsk would be so foolish as to send the sub-gar," whispered Meersa.

"No!" choked Orcutt. "Even the Lundars hate him as a fiend. He is the one who has had charge of 'pacifying' all subject races. He wallows in blood. No man in all Tela would treat with him. It cannot be him—not the sub-gar."

"We'll soon find out." Wolf turned to the Martian. "What's his name?"

But before the lizard man could answer, another voice cut in. It was a strange voice, deep and rumbling, and there was something in it that sent little chills of stark terror racing up and down every spine in the room.

"I am the sub-gar," the voice said, from beyond the doorway. "I, Znz!"

CHAPTER IV

Double-Cross

THE raider chief stared up at the giant Lundar who stalked through the entrance.

"We've met before," he remarked.

"Have we?" asked the sub-gar in a puzzled tone. "I did not know—"

"Your memory's short," retorted Wolf. "Indeed, Znz, we have met before. You stood with Rsk when my men and I were dragged before him. In fact"—he smiled thinly—"you suggested that we be sent to die in the pits of Ra, your power planet."

"Yeah," grunted Ivar, moving relentlessly forward like a great, four-armed gorilla. "That wasn't nice. I hear them pits is no honeymoon cruise. But you wanted to send us to 'em—"

Wolf caught one of the Jupiterian's arms. "Forget it," he snapped. "This is no time to pick a fight."

The Lundar's white face twisted in a grimace apparently intended to represent a smile.

"My thanks," he said. "I should hate to have to hurt one of your men—"

"No thanks are necessary," the other snapped. "My reason for stopping Ivar was that you must have had some reason for coming here. I want to know what it is."

The sub-gar's red eyes shot glances at Meersa and Orcutt.

"What I have to say is for your ears, alone," he murmured. "These others—too much knowledge might hurt them. It would be unwise—"

For a long moment the Earthman eyed the Lundar narrowly. Then he turned to Ivar. "Take our friends outside," he ordered.

The Dau princess flared.

"I will not be ordered about!" she cried. "You are not my superior—"

Wolf's eyes bored holes in hers. "I am in command here," he snapped. "You will leave. Now!"

"You can't—" Orcutt began.

"Ivar!"

The big mate shot his chief a single rebellious glance, then turned on the two Daus.

"Quit stalling!" he snarled. "You heard him. Get moving. You ain't snoring; quit acting like you was

asleep." He herded the still-protesting pair from the room.

The pirate leader turned back to Znz.

"All right," he clipped, "I've done what you wanted. Now talk!"

The sub-gar smirked. He said: "You and I have much in common, Wolf Stone!"

"Have we?" The Earthman's lips were compressed to a thin, dangerous line. "Perhaps you'd better explain what you mean."

"Of course." A moment's pause. Then: "I mean, Wolf Stone, that we both do as we like. When we see something we want, we take it. Both of us are ruthless; that is why we have risen to power."

The space raider eyed Znz warily. "Go on. Tell me what this is all leading up to."

Again the smile-grimace. The Lundar hunched forward confidentially.

"TOGETHER we can rule a universe!" he cried dramatically. "How would you like that, my friend? To loot whole worlds, instead of single freighters! To rule planets, instead of one space ship's crew! To have nations bowing before you—women fighting for your favor—"

"A pretty picture," Wolf agreed. "You have a good imagination, Znz —"

"But it is more than imagination!" the Lundar said tensely. "Together, Wolf Stone, you and I can make that vision reality. We can rule this solar system. We can make every living creature pay tribute for even being allowed to breathe—"

The Earthman bared his teeth in a mirthless smile.

"And my allies, the Daus?" he demanded. "Where do they fit in?"

Znz smiled back. "They do not," he said. "They are weak fools, meant to be ruled by men like us." A moment's pause. "Surely a leader like you would not let such slaves stand in his way. Surely you can see—"

"I am a believer in expediency," Wolf retorted. "I'm the original opportunist. I make my alliances to fit my needs. So far, my best bet—my only one, in fact has been the Daus. But if you can show me something better —" He gazed reflectively at the Lundar.

The sub-gar chuckled. It was like the sound of an avalanche of ice.

"I told you we were two of a kind!" he cried. "We see things alike."

"But so far," the Earthman reminded him, "there has been nothing to see. Or did you come all the way here from Tela in order to talk over my personal philosophy?"

"No. I came here in order to get your aid. Together, we can overthrow Rsk—"

Wolf nodded. "Yes. So I gathered. But how do we do it? That's the only question that counts."

The sub-gar took a deep breath.

"Your success against us has laid the groundwork," he explained. "There have been murmurings against Rsk.

"Now I have taken advantage of them. I have persuaded certain of our garrison commanders to join in a revolt. With you to aid us, it cannot but succeed."

"How does it work?" the Earthman demanded. Interest was written across his lean face.

"You know of Ra?"

"Your power planet? Yes. We thought about raiding it, but finally decided it was too strongly guarded."

"That is right," agreed the sub-gar. "Without help, you could do nothing."

"That is why we need each other. I have friends on Ra. They will revolt as you attack. You will seize Ra!"

"Then what?"

"Then you will turn off the power which is broadcast from Ra to every corner of the solar system. It will cripple Rsk. The atom projectors—the light guns—the space ships—the whole mechanism of our civilization—will be paralyzed."

"I see." Wolf ran his fingers thoughtfully through his thick black hair. "And what do you do?"

A SMIRK distorted the Lundar's face.

"I have long been gathering weapons," he explained, a crafty light in his red eyes. "Old weapons, all of them. Weapons which do not use the power broadcast from Ra. I have space ships, too, and aerocars, and the flying suits which we used in the days before Ra's conquest.

"With them, my men can seize Tela, Virna, and Suorz alike. Rsk will be helpless without power—and before he realizes what is happening, he will be dead!"

"I see."

"Well, what about it?" The sub-gar leaned forward eagerly. "Is it not a good plan? Can you find its flaw? Will you join me?"

The Earthman considered long and carefully. At last his cold blue eyes met the bloody orbs of the Lundar.

"I'm your man," he said grimly. "We'll do the job together, and to hell with whoever gets in the way!"

Znz exploded to his feet from the table on which he had been resting his twelve-foot frame.

"I knew you would see it!" he cried. "I knew that the loot of a universe would tempt you!"

"As it does you," the buccaneer commented bleakly. "I don't have any illusions about your purity of heart, Znz."

"Of course not," chuckled the pale giant. "Did I not tell you we were of the same cut? We both look after ourselves first." A wild spasm of laughter shook him. "Ah, Rsk! How he'll love it when he finds that this 'inspection tour' I'm making of our patrols actually is the preliminary step to his death! He'll wish he'd never treated me like a second-rate *starbo* before he's through, the *chitza!*"

"No doubt," agreed Wolf, somewhat caustically. "But now, if you can stop gloating, let's get down to details."

More than an hour passed before the plans for Ra's invasion and conquest were completed. When they were done, Znz once again embarked. His space cruiser moved off into the void, while Wolf hurried off to find Ivar.

The big Jupiterian was talking to Orcutt when the Earthman strode up.

"Some act you put on, Chief," the mate greeted him. "You sure sold that Loonie a bill of goods. Me and Orcutt and Meersa was listening outside the door."

A thin-lipped smile crossed Wolf's face. "Yes," he admitted, "it was quite a bill of good, as you say. Quite a different one than Friend Znz is expecting, anyhow. He'll find that a double-cross can work two ways."

"You mean," said Orcutt, the Dau, "that you are not betraying my princess and me?"

The look the raider shot him was as bleak as a January gale.

"Do you think so little of Wolf Stone's word as that?" he clipped. "Have I shown myself to be the kind of a dog that would turn on those who saved his life, for the sake of loot?"

The young Dau's eyes dropped. "I—I did not mean it so," he stammered in embarrassment. "It was only that you call yourself a pirate . . . and your words were so convincing when

you spoke to Znz . . ."

"I BEEN putting the dope on the right track, Chief," Ivar broke in. "I gave him the whole works—all about how you turned pirate just because the Interplanetary Federation over on our side of the void was pulling a Hitler—"

"You'd do better to keep your mouth shut!" barked the commander, his own face suddenly pale at this mention of the past. He turned on Orcutt. "Well, are you satisfied now? Or do you still think I've sold you out—"

"Please—I am sorry—"

"All right." A pause. "It's pretty obvious what Znz wants to do. He needs us to capture Ra for him, but you can stake your life that he's not planning on letting us stay with him at the finish. Some place or other along the line, he'll see to it that we're wiped out, leaving him to run things to suit himself."

"Sure, Chief. We ain't supposed to have a chance. He'd sell his own mother to Saturn. It sticks out like a *podor's* horns."

"Right. And it's no compliment to his intelligence that he thinks I'd fall for it."

Orcutt, his composure now recovered, broke in: "But what do you plan to do? You agreed to his plan, so—"

"We're going to give that traitor a surprise," the other answered. "We'll capture Ra for him, sure. But after we've got it—"

"That's something else, huh, Chief?" snorted Ivar.

"It is indeed. This is the break we've been waiting for, and we'll make the most of it. Alone, we could never defeat the Lundars. But with Znz to aid us for the time being—well, on Earth we have a saying, 'divide and conquer'." Then: "There's a lot to do. I've got to get to work."

Orcutt caught his arm as he turned to go.

"Could you . . . first . . . speak to Meersa?" the young Dau asked.

"Meersa? Why? What about?"

The princess' stocky aide shifted his feet uneasily.

"She was very sure you had betrayed us," he explained finally. "She would not even stay. She ran off before you had finished talking to Znz."

"Where'd she go?"

"I do not know. To her quarters, probably. . . . If you would see her . . ."

"Sure. Come on."

Together, the pair walked across the grounds of the garrison post to the little building in which the princess of Tela lived. Wolf knocked on the door.

"Meersa! I want to see you."

An echoing silence was his only answer.

"Meersa! Open up!"

Still silence.

The spaceman jerked open the door. He and Orcutt pushed into the Dau princess' room.

There was no one there.

"EMPTY!" exclaimed Orcutt.

"Certainly looks that way," admitted the Earthman. His blue eyes probed every corner of the chamber. He prowled about restlessly.

"I don't like it," he said at last. "I've got a feeling something's wrong."

Orcutt, the Dau, nodded acquiescence. "I, also." His broad, white face looked strained.

Wolf turned sharply.

"Probably we're seeing ghosts," he announced. "Let's go have a look around the rest of the garrison before we get worried about things."

Together, he and Meersa's stocky young aide hurried off across the grounds. From post to post they went,

searching, inquiring, looking into every likely and unlikely place of the asteroid's garrison for the girl. But an hour's investigation brought no results.

"Where can she be?" Orcutt fretted nervously. "I cannot understand."

Wolf frowned. "Just what did she say when she left?" he quizzed.

"She was very angry. At me, because I could not believe that you were betraying us, as well as at you. She swore she would no longer keep the company of traitors to Tela's cause. Then she ran out."

"Would she have been foolish enough to try to leave?" the Earthman pondered. "No matter how sore she was, would she . . ."

"Let us go to the landing port," proposed Orcutt. "There we have not yet looked. And the men there will at least know whether any ship has taken off—"

"Right. Come on."

But again they were doomed to meet with disappointment. The Venusian in charge of the transport unit shook his head.

"I am sorry, my commander," he reported, "but no ship has taken off since morning."

"None at all?"

"None—that is, except the Lundar cruiser that brought Znz hither."

"The Lundar cruiser!" exclaimed Orcutt. "Wolf Stone! Could Meersa have been taken by them—"

The Venusian interrupted. "It is the Princess Meersa you seek, my commander?"

"Yes, of course," Wolf snapped. "Have you seen her? Has she been here—"

"Yes. She arrived two hours ago, and went out among the ships. I have not seen her since—"

"Wolf!" cried Orcutt. "Could the Lundars have seized her? Could they have taken her away?"

The Earthman's blue eyes blazed. "I can't believe it," he snapped. "Their cruiser was under guard every minute. But if they did—if somehow they got Meersa on board—ah, what a master stroke!"

THE Venusian who had charge of the port was pushing buzzer buttons with all eight arms.

"I shall have every inch of the port, and every ship, searched immediately, my commander," he declared. "If the princess is here, she will be found, or—"

"No," snapped Wolf. "We can't waste time on a search now. If that girl's in Znz' hands, every minute we delay means that she'll be that much farther away."

"But what can we do?" protested Orcutt feverishly. "What else is there to try?"

The raider chief's lean brown face was grim. His voice was tight-clipped, pregnant with suppressed emotion.

"We'll follow!" he snapped. "The *Ghost* can outrun anything in the void. By morning, we'll have caught up with Znz. We'll force him to heave to for a search—"

"But your plans—your arrangements for joining forces with him to dethrone Rsk and seize the solar system—"

The Earthman shoved back an unruly lock of jet-black hair. His lips were even thinner than usual. "If necessary," he rapped curtly, "those plans will have to go by the board. Meersa's life is worth more than any of them. Once, she saved me. Now, I'll protect her, no matter how much it costs us."

He turned on the Venusian. "Order a skeleton crew onto the *Ghost*. We take off in ten minutes."

They bettered the time he specified. Seven minutes from the moment he spoke, the great space ship was in the

air, hurtling out of the asteroid's atmosphere and on across interstellar space in the wake of the Lundar cruiser. Ten hours later they were abreast their prey.

A Venusian interspacial radio man came to Wolf.

"The Lundars want to know why we are pursuing them," he reported.

"Answer that we're looking for the Princess Meersa, and that we intend to come alongside and search their ship for her," the Earthman answered.

A minute later the Venusian looked up from his instruments again.

"Znz says they do not know what you are talking about, but that they have no intention of letting us or anyone else search them."

Wolf Stone's blue eyes flashed fire. He leaned forward like an animated threat.

"Tell them they can take their choice—be searched, or be blown to hell," he snapped savagely. "Tell them that if they think they can fight off the *Ghost,* they're welcome to try it. But that they shouldn't be surprised if they never see their home port again."

And, to a Martian gunner's mate who stood at his elbow:

"Man the proton cannons! Open fire at your own discretion, at the first sign of anything suspicious."

The Venusian said: "Znz protests, but says he will submit to temporarily superior force. You may go aboard the cruiser."

THE sub-gar's red eyes were seething with anger as Wolf and a searching party boarded the Lundar ship through an air-lock.

"You put great stock by this Dau princess, Wolf Stone," he said, in a voice that shook with rage. "Too much stock. I wonder if perhaps you were not lying when you agreed to join me. If perhaps you do not mean to uphold the cause of the Daus against me—to betray me if you get the chance."

The Earthman turned on him, lean jaw hard.

"Let's not make any mistakes, Znz," he bit off coldly. "You don't trust me, and I don't trust you. We've got no reasons to, and you know it as well as I do.

"The reason we're joining forces is because we both want loot and power. Alone, we're weak. Together, we can tear a universe to pieces. So, for the time being, our interests are parallel, and either of us would be a fool to betray the other until we've gotten what we want.

"As far as the Princess Meersa is concerned, she's mine. I want her. I intend to have her—as a woman, not as a princess. And no one—sub-gar or not, ally or not—is going to stand in my way on that.

"For that matter, I wouldn't let you get away with stealing a cross-eyed *starbo,* let alone kidnapping one of my people. You'd think it proved I was afraid of you, and that I could be pushed around." He grinned wolfishly. "And neither of those ideas is correct, you know, Znz, so you might as well put up with this search gracefully."

The Lundar had regained his self-control.

"Very well, Wolf Stone," he purred. "If I must, I must." Then, smirking: "Though you should be able to do better for yourself — with our whole solar system to choose from—than to take up with a Dau princess, a woman of a subject race."

"We'll leave my taste out of it," Wolf rapped curtly.

A lizard man entered Znz' cabin. He saluted Wolf.

"The Princess Meersa is not aboard

this ship, sir," he reported in the chill, lisping voice characteristic of his race. "We have searched every inch of it, from stem to stern, but we find no traces of her."

"Right." The raider chief turned back to Znz. "My apologies. It seems that my suspicions were not well-founded."

Again the Lundar smirked. "No apologies are necessary," he declared with a ring of complete insincerity. "Such errors are quite understandable in a man of your violent temperament. We shall think no more—"

"Commander!"

It was the Venusian radio man. He rushed into the cabin waving a sheet of paper.

"Well?"

"The princess has been found, my commander. I have just received word of it from the asteroid garrison."

"Where was she?"

"She was hiding in a small torpedo ship, sir. Before anyone could stop her, she took off."

"A torpedo ship?" Wolf's brows knitted. "But with a limited range like they have—"

"There is only one place she could go, my commander. Only one planet close enough. By now, no doubt, she is fast approaching the wilderness of Suorz!"

CHAPTER V

Attack on Ra

ORCUTT, the Dau, said: "But aren't you going to search for her, at least? We cannot go away to Ra, leaving her helpless and alone on Suorz." His broad face was lined with worry.

Wolf Stone paused in his personal supervision of the *Ghost's* loading.

"Sorry, Orcutt," he said, "but I'm afraid that's just what we're going to have to do. Znz already suspects things aren't exactly what they seem; and if we give him time, he may get so jumpy he'll act on fear, instead of sticking to a logical appreciation of his own best interests. So I figure our best bet is to act now—fast! Once we get Ra—"

"But Meersa!" the stocky young Dau protested. "She may be in danger. Even now, she may be dead—"

"Sorry, Orcutt."

"Then I won't go!"

Wolf gazed at him. "And what do you propose to do?" he asked.

"I'll take a torpedo ship and go after her myself," the Dau flared. "I'll show her there's one man who cares more her her, herself, than for any dream of conquest—"

"Orcutt, Orcutt!" the Earthman reproached. "Can't you see it doesn't make sense? What Meersa wants is freedom for the Daus, not personal safety. Furthermore, she's well able to take care of herself on Suorz. There's only three groups there—the Lundars, whom she'll be careful to avoid; the Bans, who are so primitive and dull-witted they're not at all likely to hurt her; and a colony of your own people, the Daus, who'll go out of their way to watch over her."

"But Suorz is a wilderness," the other persisted stubbornly. "Millions of square miles of the worst kind of country, with nothing inhabiting most of it but *quirsts* and *peens*." He glared at Wolf. "Have you ever seen a *quirst?* We've got some in the great interplanetary zoo back on Tela. They're like snakes with arms. Let them even breathe on you and you will welcome death. They are the most venomous creatures in the whole solar system. They strike without warning, for the sheer love of killing. Think of poor

Meersa, there on Suorz, with them!" He shuddered.

"I wish I could agree with you," answered Wolf quietly, "but I can't. I'm as anxious as you are to protect Meersa —you saw how quickly I ordered the *Ghost* into action when I thought the Lundars had her; but right now, I think she's safe. And if she isn't, frankly, it's because she's acted like a stubborn kid instead of a woman with the responsibilities of a princess."

"Well," sulked Orcutt, "I still won't go to Ra. Meersa means more—"

"All right, then; go wandering off across Suorz in a torpedo ship if you want to!" snapped the Earthman, his patience exhausted. "Do whatever you want to. But I've got work to do, so leave me alone."

Turning on his heel, he again gave his full attention to the *Ghost's* loading.

AN HOUR later Orcutt, in a tiny, two-man torpedo ship, took off for Suorz.

It was nearly two days after the *Ghost's* return from intercepting the Lundar cruiser, however, before Wolf completed preparations for the invasion of Ra.

"It looks good, chief," Ivar grunted as they finally blasted off from their asteroid base. "The old girl's in swell shape. And them new atom projectors the Daus showed us how to build—say, them is going to be quite a shock for the Loonies on Ra. Imagine being able to blow a bunch of guys to kingdom come with their own power!"

Wolf nodded. "It's a sweet set-up, all right, Ivar. If there's a flaw to it, I haven't been able to find it."

The Venusian in charge of the radio room came in. "A code message from Znz, my commander," he reported. "He says all details are ready. We are to attack on signal, and at the positions indicated previously."

"Right." Wolf turned back to his mate. "Full speed ahead, Ivar. The quicker we get there, the quicker we can go into action."

But despite the *Ghost's* best speed, the trip to the remote little power planet took more than a week. Then, at last, they were hanging in interstellar space above it.

"There it stands, Ivar," Wolf said softly, his eyes gleaming, lean face tense. "That little globe we see below us is the key to the Lundar civilization. Smash it, and we've smashed them."

The big mate nodded. "Yeah. Without the power they send out from there, them Loonies are up a creek." A pause. "What angle we working, chief? How do we hit 'em?"

"We come in on a beam," the buccaneer leader answered. "By following it, we can get close enough to blast their defenses. Znz' followers are immobilizing the atom-projectors in that area."

"Uhhh," grunted his aide.

Wolf eyed him narrowly. "What's the trouble, Ivar? You don't sound too enthusiastic."

"Uhhh . . ."

"Go ahead. Tell me. What is it?"

The big Jupiterian raised one of his four brawny arms, scratched the back of his bull neck reflectively.

"Chief," he demanded at last, very solemnly, "do you figure this Znz Loonie is on the up-and-up? Or is he throwing a loose peg, like a Uranian gambler in a *horo* game?"

"I see what you're getting at, all right." Wolf nodded slowly. "And the answer is: no, I don't trust him as far as I could throw him—which isn't far, considering that he's twelve feet tall and not too easy tossing."

"I DON'T like that beam business, chief," his mate announced grimly.

"What I mean is, maybe it's supposed to guide us in, and then again, maybe it ain't. Maybe it's just supposed to put us right where them zombies down on Ra can blow us clear out of the solar system, without no chance at all of missing."

The raider chief frowned. "I don't think that's it, Ivar," he said. "After all, Znz has got to have somebody to cut off the power, or his uprisings on Virna and Tele are going to go haywire."

"Has he?"

"What do you mean?" The Earthman eyed the burly man from Jupiter with an air of puzzlement.

"Well—" Ivar gnawed his lip, struggling to find words to fit his meaning—, "well, it's like this. If I was Znz, I sure never would deal you in."

"How would you get around it?"

"Look, chief, if Znz has got a bunch of his own guys on Ra, why don't they just bust up the outfit that broadcasts the power? It'd be lots easier than knocking off a whole batch of atom-projector batteries, wouldn't it?" He thumped one big fist into the palm of another hand for emphasis. "You ask me, chief, that Znz lug is playing you for a sap. He ain't planning to cut you in on nothing. All he wants to do is kill us all off, so we ain't going to be messing around while he's got his revolution on the fire."

There was a long moment of silence, broken only by the creak of Wolf Stone's footsteps as he paced the floor. His thin lips were compressed tightly against his teeth, and his blue eyes were narrowed and hard.

"It adds up," he said at last. "God knows it adds up, Ivar. Smashing the power broadcast equipment would stop Rsk just as thoroughly as letting us capture Ra—and with a lot less danger of trouble, too. By blasting us, he'd kill two birds with one stone—"

The Earthman stopped in mid-sentence. He whirled to face his mate.

"You win, Ivar!" he snapped. "From here on out, we play it alone."

A grin like a half-moon pasted itself on the big Jupiterian's face.

"Swell, chief!" he grunted. "What's our angle now? Do we still try to knock off Ra?"

The other nodded. "Sure. With this solar system out of power, we hold all the cards."

"How do we work it?"

A reckless, daredevil grin twisted the corners of the Earthman's mouth.

"We attack, Ivar. We attack, just like we promised to. Only instead of letting Znz name the place and time, we'll choose our own."

"Where and when, chief?"

"The place? The other side of Ra, Ivar. And the time? Why, Ivar,"—and the raider's eyes flashed fire—"the time is as fast as we can get there!"

TENSE minutes followed. Minutes of tumult, as the *Ghost* changed course and the indicators moved forward to "full speed ahead." Alert minutes, with every piece of gear being checked and rechecked. But, above all, joyous, exciting minutes—the minutes in which fighting men from a dozen worlds girded themselves again for battle.

"We'll come in fast," Wolf rapped to his aides. "With luck, we'll be on top of those devils down below before they realize what's up. When we land—well, we'll let that take care of itself."

The next instant they plunged Raward.

Centered in the telescreen, the little power planet grew larger by the second. It filled the ground glass, developed details of geography, broke into all the multitudinous landscapes that go to make up a world.

"Them Loonies ain't wise yet, chief," Ivar grunted from his place beside Wolf. "They ain't opened up on us at all yet. And we're nearly down, too."

As if to contradict him, the *Ghost* suddenly rocked from side to side, like a kite in a thunderstorm.

"Ai! That was close!" the mate gasped.

But before the words were out of his mouth, a great splash of light flared on Ra's surface.

"Good shooting!" exclaimed Wolf. "They missed us with their first barrage, but we got them with ours. We're one up on them!"

Other batteries now joined the battle. The bolts from their atom projectors tore at the pirate ship. With deadly aim, the *Ghost's* gunners gave them back good measure.

Then, suddenly, the ship was through the worst of the hail of death.

"That's the trouble with them atom projectors," Ivar thundered into Wolf's ear. "They may be all right for long range stuff, but when you get up close, where you have to place your shots fast, give me a proton cannon any day."

Already, these latter were taking a terrific toll of Ra's defenders. Every time a battery on the ground opened fire, the awful shafts of energy belched from the *Ghost*, smashing the mightiest defenses as if they were cardboard.

"We are landing, my commander!" cried the Venusian at the helm.

"We've blasted the last of the batteries on this side of the planet!" echoed the lizard man who headed the gunners. "We can use it for a base."

A minute later the great space ship was sliding to a precarious stop amid the ruins of the silenced atom projectors.

BUT now came a new menace. From all sides, in rushed mobile, tank-like units, while overhead tiny torpedo ships and armed aerocars whistled down to harass the invaders with a storm of deadly energy-bolts.

"No wonder this place got the reputation of being impregnable," grated Wolf. "They've got every known defense on hand and ready for action. Except for surprising them, we wouldn't have gotten within a hundred miles of the ground before we'd have been blasted to nothing."

"What do we do now, chief?" Ivar demanded a bit anxiously. "Some of them outfits is getting a little too close for comfort. They'll have our range in a minute, and then—wham!"

"Yes. I know." The other's face was taut with strain. He paced the floor. "The trouble is, we haven't got the man-power to take over the rest of the planet. And as long as the Lundars are here, we're penned up like chickens in a coop."

"Yeah," grunted Ivar dourly. "What's more, they got the mines and the energy, and we ain't. And we sure could use some."

"The mines!"

"Huh? What did you say, chief?"

But Wolf was shouting for the Venusian navigator-pilot. In a moment the eight-armed creature came running up.

"Yes, my commander?"

"We're making a run for the head of the mine-shafts!" snapped the Earthman. "Prepare for a take-off."

Then, to the Martian gunners' mate: "Get ready for a fight. A real one!"

Ivar caught at his arm.

"What's got into you, chief?" he demanded. "Them mines is where the Loonies will have the heaviest artillery they got. If we go there—"

Wolf turned on him.

"We've got to do it!" he grated. "We can't retreat now—they'd nail us before we got ten miles out. That means we've

got to stay here and win."

"Well," growled the Jupiterian dubiously, "maybe the shock'll lick 'em. But I doubt it."

The buccaneer leader flashed him a brief grin.

"If we can get those mine shafts, we'll have more than shock to use to lick 'em," he retorted.

The next instant the *Ghost* was again in the air. Like a monster skyrocket, it blazed across Ra's sky, its mighty proton cannons carving a path for it through the heart of the Lundar defenses.

Then it stumbled in mid-flight like a stricken hawk. Almost fell.

"We are hit, sir!" shouted the Martian gunners' mate. "They have torn a bad gash near our stern."

"Our power plant is crippled, my commander!" called out a Venusian.

"Can we make it to the mines?"

"Limping, perhaps; but we shall be an easy target."

"Hear that, you gunners?" Wolf roared. "We're bogged down. That means you've got to wipe out every Lundar battery within range. If one gets a clear shot at us now—"

A crippled bird, the *Ghost* lurched onward. Then:

"Up ahead, chief! The mine shafts!"

"Crash in to a landing! We'll make our fight around the shafts!"

WITH an avalanche roar of rending metal and cracking rock, the *Ghost* came in. Almost in the shadow of the great slag piles that surrounded the mine heads, she lurched to a stop.

"The mines! Run for them!"

The *Ghost* belched forth men. Weapons in hand, they stormed across the yard that separated their battered ship from the looming tipples.

A dozen Lundars sprang up to oppose them, light guns spearing forth purple rays. They went down like ten-pins beneath the wave of raiders.

"The slag piles!" roared Wolf. "Occupy them! Make them our barricades!"

Another party of Lundars, the crew of an atom-projector battery, burst into view. A swarm of buccaneers rushed to meet them. Wolf was in the forefront.

"I want a prisoner!" he shouted as he dropped the first of the enemy party with a deadly Earth ray gun. "Save me one prisoner!"

Then there was no time for talking. Not even for shouting orders. The pirates were grappling hand-to-hand with their giant foes. Making up for small stature with a savagery the paste-colored ogres could not withstand.

A moment that was eternity, and the job was done. The Lundars who had guarded the mine shafts were dead, all but one of them. And he lay prostrate, panting, held down by Ivar and two mighty-thewed Saturnians, his lymph-like blood oozing from a shoulder wound where one of the Saturnians had bitten him in a dozen places.

Back on the slag piles, the rest of the *Ghost's* crew were sweating their lives away, dragging proton cannons and atom projectors to makeshift emplacements.

Wolf Stone bent over the captive Lundar.

"Where are the slaves?" he questioned fiercely. "Where are the Daus, and the Bans, and all the rest of the poor devils you've got working these hell-holes?"

The giant tried to spit in the Earthman's face.

The raider chief gestured peremptorily. One of the Saturnians—both of his horrible, hairy heads grinning ghoulishly—braced himself. He gripped the Lundar's arm in a grasp of iron.

The massive muscles of his back and shoulders swelled. With one jerk he snapped the prisoner's arm.

A cry of agony burst from the Lundar's white lips. Sweat stood out on his forehead.

"I want to know! Where are the slaves?" Wolf's voice had the ring of doom itself.

The Saturnian caught the Lundar's other arm.

"No!" shrieked the prisoner. "They are in the first shaft. Their quarters are at its foot. All are there—"

"That's all I want to know!" snapped the Earthman. "Come on, men!" He ran toward the mine the Lundar had indicated.

The two Saturnians shambled after him. Only Ivar hesitated. He pulled his ray gun. Levelled it at the prisoner's head. His finger tightened on the trigger . . .

WOLF and the Saturnians scrambled into a monster mine car, weapons in hand, alert for trickery. Deep into the bowels of Ra they plummeted. Down . . . down . . . down . . . until at last the car reached bottom. A narrow tunnel led still further into the depths. They followed it, tense and expectant, straining their eyes in the dim light.

Then two Lundar guards loomed before them, light guns in hand.

The first Wolf dropped with a single ray gun blast. The Saturnians sprang like tigers onto the other, disdaining even to use their weapons, so great was their love of battle.

Beyond them loomed a great metal door. The buccaneer leader blasted at its lock. Watched the metal fuse and twist and drop away.

The door swung open.

The sight beyond would have chilled the heart of Ivan the Terrible, himself.

For a moment the three raiders stood in stunned silence, staring at a sight the like of which not one of them had ever seen before.

"And I thought Neptune's salt pits were the closest I would ever be to hell!" Wolf whispered at last.

Then he and the Saturnians were moving forward, among the awful, wasted, rotted forms of the men who gave this universe its power. Strong men, they had been. And some of them —the younger, and those but recently brought here—still were. But most of them lay like putrefying corpses, too stupefied to move.

"Men!" shouted Wolf in the dialect of the Daus. "You're free—free to fight the Lundars again!"

At first they would not, could not, believe him. Precious minutes dragged by while he explained, argued, debated. Then, all at once, it seemed to dawn on them. Like a human tidal wave, they came alive. Poured out of their prison and down the tunnel to where the mine cars waited.

Ivar was at the head of the shaft.

"Chief! What you been doing?" he cried. "We need you bad. Them Loonies is too much for us. They got us outnumbered, and they're pushing us back."

"They don't outnumber us any more, Ivar!" Wolf answered grimly. "Break out some guns! I've brought us a battalion from hell!"

CHAPTER VI

When Worlds Collide

HATE turned to action is an awful thing. It took the slaves from the mines of Ra less than two days to slash and blast and stab their way to complete control of the little power planet. Free again, armed by the raid-

ers, no Lundar could withstand them as they charged forward in one mad rush after another, welcoming death as a friend come to release them from the lingering agony of an existence poisoned by the awful radioactivity of the metal they had been mining.

In a week, Venusian repairmen had the *Ghost* nearly ready for flight again. Others of the crew were exploring every inch of Ra's surface, while Moko, the Uranian scientist, was beside himself with joy at the opportunity to investigate the system of power broadcasting developed by the Lundars.

"Simple. Really it is. Quite simple," he assured Wolf. "Electrolytic process. The ore's so pure that all they have to do is to shoot the current through it. Turns it into pure energy. They pick it up as vibrations. Broadcast it. The receivers reconvert the waves into power."

"I think we ought to turn a little of it into power right now, then," grunted Ivar, who stood beside the commander. "That big goon, Znz, ain't wasting time, you can bet your neck on that. By now he's probably got Rsk run short-legged. Believe me, chief, we ought to turn on enough power for interspacial radio work, anyhow. Then we could get an angle on what's cooking."

But Wolf Stone shook his head.

"No," he said. "Not until the *Ghost* is ready to cruise again. Give the Lundars power, and they might sweep down on us before we could stop them. And with the *Ghost* crippled, what could we send out to stop them? Nothing but the bunch of broken-down, atomic-powered freighters we captured from the Lundars here.

"No." He shook his head again. "We'd be trapped here, with nothing but ground defenses. And if we could break those defenses once, someone else could do it again. We're better off to leave the power turned off completely."

"You don't make sense, chief," his mate protested. "If anyone started to attack us, we could snap the power off, and they'd be left drifting—"

"Maybe. Or maybe the power would let them get just close enough to come the rest of the way with some other kind of energy. Sorry, Ivar. But the power stays turned off. We're raiders. We need a ship under our feet. Not to be trapped on a stinking little planet like this one."

"Can't stay too long, though," broke in Moko. "Got to leave soon."

"Why?"

The Uranian smoothed the purple beard that covered the upper half of his face.

"Too dangerous," he retorted. "This whole planet's one big lump of radioactivity. You've seen the sores. The ones on the Daus and Bans, and all the rest who worked in the mines. They rot away. It's the ore. Whole planet's that way—"

"You mean—"

"Get us too, if we stay too long. Got to take off. Quick—"

The door burst open. A Martian rushed in.

"There is a ship approaching, sir!" he exclaimed. "We sighted it but a moment ago."

"A SHIP?" Wolf went tense. "But how—?"

"They had space ships in this solar system before them Loonies knocked off Ra and got all worked up over the broadcast power idea, chief," Ivar reminded him. "Maybe there's still some of them old outfits kicking around, huh? Like them freighters we found here."

"Could be. But we better take a look."

They hurried outside.

"It is still too far out to be visible to the naked eye, sir," the Martian reported. "We saw it through the telescreen magnifier on board the *Ghost*."

"Right. We'll go on board. See to it that our proton cannon are ready."

A Venusian was manipulating the telescreen.

"It is larger now, my commander," he announced. "The ship comes closer."

Together, Wolf and Ivar studied the image in the screen.

"Something new to me, chief," grunted the big mate, frowning. "I never seen one like it before."

"Neither have I." And, to the Venusian: "Get one of the Daus in here. Maybe he'll recognize it."

A minute later one of the natives of Tela was beside them.

"Yes," he agreed after a moment's scrutiny, "I have seen such ships before. But it is old. Very old. It is one of those my people used before the Lundar conquest, powered by atomic energy."

Eyes narrowed, Wolf stared at the image of the approaching ship. It was limping along slowly, a far cry from the swift, efficient vessels of the Lundars, let alone the *Ghost*.

"There's nothing to do but let it come," he decided finally. "But we'll keep it covered every inch of the way. At the first sign of trouble—we drop it."

Slowly, the ship hovering above Ra came closer and closer, lumbering laboriously onward toward the face of the planet. On the ground, the *Ghost's* crew and the freed slaves waited on the alert, tensely expectant.

"Watch it, men!" Wolf rapped, his blue eyes glued to the now-visible space ship. "We're taking no more chances than we have to. If you see anything suspicious, fire at will!"

Still nothing untoward happened. The ship settled clumsily. Maneuvered for a favorable position. At last landed with a thump in a valley between two of the great slag piles.

One of the *Ghost's* buccaneers, an Earthman, started to approach it.

"Back!" roared Wolf. "Wait 'til they open up!"

As if prompted by his words, the forward hatchway of the ship swung outward. A familiar figure appeared.

"Orcutt!"

"YES. Orcutt!" The young Dau swung to the ground. His broad face was gaunt. Great, dark hollows shadowed his eyes. He stumbled as he came forward to meet the raiders. Wolf caught his arm.

"Orcutt! What is it? Tell me!"

"It's . . . Meersa."

"Meersa! What's happened to her?"

"The Lundars . . . they've got her."

"The Lundars!"

"Znz has her. He captured her on Suorz."

Wolf's bronzed face was nearly as pale as that of the Dau princess' aide.

"Start at the beginning," he commanded sharply. "Tell me exactly what happened."

"Well . . . I went to Suorz in the torpedo ship, just as I'd planned to. And I even found Meersa. She was all right, just as you said she'd be.

"We went in our ships to the Dau colony on Suorz. I could not quite convince Meersa that you did not mean to betray her. She wanted to stir up a revolt in the colony, drive the Lundar garrison off the planet. That's how we happened to fix up this ship." He jerked his head in the direction of the vessel in which he had come.

"Yes. But go on. How'd the Lundars happen to capture you?"

"It was Znz. You had hardly left your asteroid base for the raid on Ra,

Wolf Stone, when he appeared. Already he was betraying you, even before—"

"I can imagine that without any trouble. But what about Meersa?"

The young Dau tried to force a smile; failed miserably.

"Znz' men were wearing the flying suits the Lundars used for short trips before they got Ra's power," he continued. "They came down on us one night while Meersa and I were reconnoitering in space between Suorz and the asteroid. We were in our torpedo ships. We each had a helper from the Dau colony—only one, though; those little ships will accommodate only two men."

"But what about the Lundars?"

"They came upon us suddenly. Their bodies, in the flying suits, were as long as our ships. They threatened us, by gestures, that they would burn open our cockpits unless we obeyed them. That would have meant instant death, so we were forced to go with them to where a Lundar cruiser was stationed. Znz, also, was there. He told us he had sent you to your destruction, and that he intended to keep us prisoners.

"Then the power went off. When it did not come back on, Znz was furious. I knew then that you had not been killed—that somehow you had captured Ra. So when a chance came for me to escape, I took it, even though I was not able to save Meersa. I went to the Dau colony and got this old freighter and a crew. We came here at top speed, hoping you could somehow save Meersa."

"With Znz stranded on Suorz?" Wolf smiled grimly. "I wouldn't be surprised if I could, Orcutt. We've got the *Ghost* nearly ready to fly again—"

"But Znz is not stranded" the young Dau broke in excitedly.

"HE'S not stranded? What do you mean?"

"Did I not tell you? The cruiser he came to Suorz in was equipped for flight without the broadcast power. Even before I escaped, he was making his plans to leave for Virna, the home planet of the Lundars. His cruiser took off but a few hours before we did—"

"Virna!" Wolf's face was pale again as he exploded the name. "If he ever gets there, there's no chance at all of rescuing Meersa. It's beyond the realm of possibility that we could invade the Lundars' own planet and still save her alive."

"Of course. But could you not catch his cruiser before he reaches Virna? The *Ghost* is fast, and, without broadcast power, Znz' own ship is even slower than the one in which I came here—"

"It wouldn't do any good. He'd put in at Tela, instead, if he saw we were going to catch him."

"But he cannot put in at Tela!" Orcutt cried excitedly. "There his revolt failed, and Rsk is still in control. It would be as much as his life was worth to land there!"

There was a gleam of excitement in Wolf's eyes, too, now.

"Maybe we can make it, then," he snapped. "Virna's a long way from Suorz." He turned. "Moko!"

The little Uranian stepped forward. "Yes, yes?"

"Give us some fast calculations. Can we catch Znz before he gets to Virna?"

The scientist whipped out a scratch-pad. "Have to figure distance—speed—route," he chattered, and began firing questions at Orcutt.

For nearly a minute, then, he calculated and checked. At last he glanced up.

"No. Can't be done. You'd be two

days late. Maybe more. *Ghost's* not ready to blast off, anyhow—"

"But there must be some way—"

"Maybe. But I don't know it. Have to go faster than any ship I've ever seen."

The pirate commander turned on his heel. "Come on, Orcutt. You, too, Ivar. I've got some thinking to do."

Two hours later, he was still racking his brain for a way out. For the fiftieth time he halted in front of the great celestial chart which hung on the wall of the *Ghost's* control room.

"There must be a way!" he fumed. "There's always a way—"

"—if you can find it," grunted Ivar dourly. "Yeah, you've said that a million times, Chief. But this time there just ain't none. Not unless you can rock this whole damned chunk of mud off its orbit on a special trip to Virna—"

The lean Earthman stopped dead in his tracks.

"That's it!" he exclaimed.

"Huh? What you saying, Chief? What is it?"

"You hit it, Ivar! You called the turn!" And, to Orcutt: "Get Moko! Quick! Every minute counts now!"

THE young Dau dashed out. Seconds later he was back, dragging with him the sputtering little Uranian.

"Get your hands off me, you *podor!*" screamed the purple-bearded scientist, struggling to escape. "Let me alone—!"

"Moko!"

The Uranian stopped short in his tirade, caught by the bite of Wolf Stone's voice.

"Yes, yes?"

"Moko, Znz isn't going to get to Virna!" he blazed. "We're going to beat him to the draw—"

"Have to show me—"

"I will. Moko, we're going to knock Virna out of the sky!"

"What?"

"You said this planet is practically a solid lump of radioactive ore, didn't you?"

"Yes, but—"

"All right, then!" There was a triumphant fire in the Earthman's cold blue eyes. "We're going to throw Ra at Virna, faster than any missile ever went before. So fast that it'll hit Virna before Znz' cruiser can possibly get there—"

"But—how—you can't—no—it isn't possible—"

"It is possible. Look here." Wolf's lean forefinger traced a course across the celestial chart. "See, Znz won't ever pass between Ra and Virna, so we don't need to worry about that angle."

"But you cannot move a planet from its orbit—"

"We can this one." The buccaneer chief's face was flushed with sudden enthusiasm. The cords of his neck were taut with excitement.

"Don't you see?" he rushed on. "Ra is one big lump of radioactivity—of energy, waiting to be released. If we let enough of that power go, and in the right direction, we'll blast Ra through space like a comet with an automatic pilot—"

"But how? Can't control it—can't—"

"Yes. We can. At least, we can if you were right about the energy being released through electrolysis."

"Of course I was right!" the little scientist bristled.

"All right, then. First, you'll have to calculate the angle of approach, and all—you know, just how to aim Ra in order to hit Virna—"

"Yes. Yes. Go on." The Uranian's eyes were bright with interest.

"Then we'll put two of the old freighters the Lundars left here out in

space. We'll anchor them exactly according to your calculations. Then, by passing a powerful bolt of electricity between them, we'll electrolyze one whole side of the planet."

"You mean touch the whole works off like a skyrocket, Chief?" burst out Ivar in stark, staring amazement. "Blow it all the way across the solar system, and into Virna—"

"Yes. That's it. Exactly."

"NO. You can't." It was Moko. He shook his head vigorously. "No. Not enough power. Where could you get a bolt that strong?"

"From Ra."

"What?"

"From Ra." Wolf's eyes were gleaming. "Don't you see? This planet has been supplying a whole universe with power. Can you imagine what that would mean, if we threw the broadcast system on full force, and all channeled into one great bolt, passing between those two freighters—?"

A look of awe transfused the scientist's purple-bearded face.

"Wolf Stone," he whispered, "you are mad. But also, I think, you are a genius. Your plan is insane, but it might work. We shall try it!"

Every man who could lift a hand worked in the mad hours that followed. In minutes, almost, the *Ghost's* repairs were completed, and the great raider ship was ready to take the air. The former Lundar slaves were loaded onto the freighters captured in the occupation of Ra and sent far out into space, to give them time to put sufficient distance between themselves and the doomed power planet.

The raiders, meanwhile, equipped two of the freighters with the electrical apparatus necessary for them to serve as the poles in the great experiment. Ra's power broadcasting system was changed to allow completely automatic operation.

At last Moko the Uranian came out of his quarters.

"The figures," he told Wolf. "All checked. Ready to go. Here"—he shoved forward a slip of paper—"positions for the freighters. Go ahead. Any time you say."

"Right." The raider chief roared orders, watched the two-pole vessels rumble aloft.

A last-minute check-up. Then:

"Prepare to blast off. We pick up the men on the freighters, then head for outer space."

The jerk of the take-off came and went. The slowing to allow the men delegated to placing the freighters to come back aboard the *Ghost*. The long run to a safe position. And then—

"Are we ready?"

Little Moko checked a chronometer.

"Another minute and the position will be exactly right for intercepting Virna's orbit," he said. "Everything's automatic. We don't do anything."

Silence. Tense, pregnant silence. With every eye focussed on the telescreen, where the image of Ra hung centered and motionless.

Baroom!

Even here, a thousand miles out in space, they could feel the concussion. One side of Ra suddenly glowed red, then white, in the telescreen. The next instant the power planet was moving. Leaving its orbit. Slashing a new path across the void. Gaining speed. Faster, faster, faster, with flame seething in its wake like the blast from a rocket's tail.

"It is going!" whispered Orcutt, the Dau, his voice shaking.

On and on it went, out through the eternal night of interstellar space. On and on, toward Virna, drawn there like a needle to a magnet.

"Full speed ahead," commanded

Wolf Stone. "We've still got to find Znz."

"Full speed ahead!" echoed Ivar thunderously. "Get moving, you lugs! The chief says blast!"

THREE days later the pin-point of light that was Virna suddenly leaped to match-head size. An instant later it went out entirely.

"They're gone!" choked Orcutt, the Dau, tautly. "The Lundars' home planet is gone!"

But it remained for the strange little Uranian scientist, Moko, a life-long enemy of totalitarianism, to carve the epitaph.

Succinctly, he said:

"One less dictatorship."

CHAPTER VII

Trouble on Tela

THEY came at last to Suorz, and asked at the Dau colony whether Znz and his Lundar cruiser had returned there.

The answer was in the negative.

"Where could that devil have gone to?" Wolf demanded savagely, pacing the floor of his cabin aboard the *Ghost*. "No one can vanish completely. Not even out in the void."

"Chief," interrupted Ivar hesitantly, "ain't there one chance you ain't thought of?"

"Such as?"

"Ra, Chief."

Across the room, Orcutt shuddered. Wolf glared at his mate.

"It's a physical impossibility," he snapped. "Even if he'd wanted to, and tried to, Znz couldn't have gotten his vessel to a point where it could have been hit. If I'd thought he could, with Meersa on board as she was, I'd have never considered the idea."

Moko chimed in: "I agree. I checked that course. Not a chance of Znz hitting or being hit." A pause. "Lots of asteroids around, anyhow. Znz could be there. Might have stopped off anywhere."

"But what are we going to do?" demanded Orcutt, licking his pale lips in worried fashion. "We cannot search every asteroid. It would take forever—"

"We won't have to." Wolf was suddenly decisive. "In all this talk about Znz hiding on an asteroid, we're all forgetting that the average asteriod is a pretty barren spot, incapable of supporting life."

"You mean that we should search only some of the asteroids—?"

"No. It would be a waste of time to search any of them. Stop and consider: if you were Znz, what would you do?"

Ivar snorted. "Huh! That's easy. Blow my head off with a ray gun before you catched up to me, that's what I'd do. And so would anyone else with a brain above an amoeba."

"Hmmm . . ." Moko considered. "With Ra and Virna both destroyed, 's not much left. Just Tela and Suorz. Not on Suorz, either. That leaves Tela . . ."

"It could not be Tela," Orcutt moped tonelessly. "Znz and Rsk now are deadly enemies because of Znz' revolt. Znz could not go there—"

"But emergencies make strange bedfellows," cut in Wolf grimly. "Anyhow, I'm wondering if the destruction of Virna wouldn't be just enough to bring those two cutthroats together again."

THE young Dau still shook his head.

"It is too much to believe," he said. "Besides, if Meersa is on Tela, and in the hands of the Lundars there, she

might as well be dead. No one could help her—"

"Still and all, we're going to have a try at it."

"What—" The princess' stocky aide jerked alert.

"Yes." Wolf nodded. "Better to do something, and have it the wrong thing, than to grow old waiting but accomplishing nothing."

"But how—"

"The *Ghost's* in the best of shape. We'll try a little raiding."

A lumbering Lundar freighter of the type used before the advent of Ra's power became the buccaneers' victim. It was just leaving Tela for Suorz when they struck. Two Saturnians dragged its captain before Wolf Stone.

"Who's ruling Tela?" the pirate chief demanded, his blue eyes looking straight into the Lundar's red orbs. "Is it Rsk or Znz?"

For a moment the captive hesitated, then decided it would be best to answer.

"It is as before," he said at last in a surly tone. "Rsk is gar, Znz sub-gar. After the revolt, Rsk would have killed Znz—in fact, he went so far as to put a price on his head. But when Virna was destroyed, and Ra with it, he thought better of it and allowed Znz to return, so that you might not destroy them separately."

Wolf glanced over at Orcutt and Ivar. "See?" he cried triumphantly. "What did I tell you?"

And then, to the Lundar captain:

"What happened to the Princess Meersa? Where's she?"

The other shrugged his great shoulders. "I do not know. Who cares what happens to the women of a subject race?"

At that, Orcutt sprang forward, but Ivar—at a gesture from Wolf—held him back.

"Why waste your energy?" the spaceman said. "We have more important work to do."

The young Dau sagged back, eyes still smouldering.

"But what can we do?" he asked hopelessly. "You have worked miracles, Wolf Stone. But even you cannot hope to attack Tela with one space ship."

A thin smile lit up the Earthman's face. He motioned the Saturnians to drag the Lundar out. Then he crossed the cabin to where Orcutt had slumped down. He gripped the stocky youth's shoulder.

"Sometimes, Orcutt," he declared quietly, "a frontal attack is not the best policy."

The other did not answer.

"This is one of them," Wolf went on. "I think it's fairly reasonable to believe that Meersa is somewhere on Tela. Certainly they wouldn't kill her just for the fun of it—"

A VENUSIAN burst in.

"A small space ship is coming out from Tela, my commander," he announced. "Shall we seize it?"

Wolf nodded. "Might as well. Now that the Lundars haven't got Ra's power, we can outrun them every time."

The Venusian grinned. "It will not be hard this time, my commander, for this craft has seen us, yet does not flee."

"They're not r u n n i n g?" Wolf frowned. "I don't like the sound of that. That smells like a trap."

Together, the little group hurried to the telescreen.

"Look at the way they are maneuvering!" cried Orcutt. "They are asking that we parley."

"Yes." Wolf turned to the navigator-pilot. "Let them come alongside. But watch out for tricks."

A few moments later, not a Lundar, but a Dau, came aboard through the

Ghost's airlock.

"Niker!" cried Orcutt.

The other nodded. "Yes, Orcutt. It is I. Though when I consider my mission, I am ashamed to confess it."

"Your mission? What do you mean, my good friend?"

"You know that Rsk and Znz again rule Tela together?"

"Yes. Of course."

"I come as their messenger, Orcutt."

"You! Their messenger!"

Niker smiled sadly. "Yes, Orcutt. I have no choice but to do as they tell me. The lives of my wife and children hang in the balance."

"Of course. I should have known." Orcutt patted the other's shoulder in consolation. Then: "But what message do you bring, Niker?"

"Our princess, Meersa, is a prisoner, Orcutt."

"Then they *have* got her!"

"Yes—"

Anguish flooded Orcutt's face. He interrupted: "What is it they plan to do with her? Quick, Niker! Tell me!"

"Orcutt, it breaks my heart to tell you, but—they say you raiders must leave the solar system forever. If you agree, Princess Meersa will be allowed to live out her life as a prisoner. She will never be free, but she will be kindly treated and made as happy as possible."

"And if we do not leave?"

"You remember the great zoo?"

"Yes. Of course."

"And the quirsts of Suorz? The small, poisonous snakes with arms?"

"Yes."

"If you do not leave, Orcutt, Meersa will be thrown into their cage at the zoo. She will die the awful, lingering death their fangs bring."

"No! It can't be! Not even the Lundars would do a thing so horrible—"

"It is what they threaten, Orcutt. They give you but twenty-four hours to decide. At the end of that time I am to be returned with your sworn promise to leave, and with that of Wolf Stone. And by the time my little ship reaches the great central port, this vessel, the *Ghost,* must already be on its way out into the void, leaving this solar system forever."

THE shoulders of Orcutt the Dau slumped hopelessly. His broad face was suddenly haggard. When he spoke, it was in the low stumbling monotone of a broken man.

"There is no need to wait twenty-four hours for our answer," he said. "There can be but one decision. We shall leave, Niker. Now. Meersa—"

"No!"

The savage intensity of Wolf Stone's voice brought both Daus up short. They spun to face the raider chief.

All through their discussion, he had leaned silently against the cabin wall. Now he stood clear, feet wide apart, back stiff and unbending, head thrust forward just a trifle with the very fierceness of his emotion. His thumbs were thrust into the broad *yako*-leather belt that girded his waist. Coal-black hair awry, blue eyes chill with menace against the bronzed background of his lean hard face, he looked his name—savage and dangerous and cunning as a gaunt old timber wolf; hard and unyielding as the very rock of ages.

"No!" he repeated. "We don't leave, now or ever, until we're ready to go."

"But Meersa—" choked Orcutt.

The Earthman turned on him with all the ferocity of a wounded tiger.

"Do you think Wolf Stone's promise means nothing?"

"Your promise?"

"The day that Meersa saved my life, I swore to her that I'd see her enemies in hell. The least I can do is to die

trying to put them there."

"But Meersa!" the young Dau whispered again. "Do you not see, Wolf? Were we to attack, she would die a death worse than any you can imagine. We cannot risk it—"

"Do you know this Niker well? Do you trust him?"

Orcutt nodded. "With my life," he said simply. "He is one of my oldest friends. And of Meersa's."

Wolf turned on Niker.

"Do you know that the Lundars have the princess a prisoner?" he demanded.

"I have seen her. I have talked with her."

"All right, then. Come on, Orcutt. We've got to work fast."

"But what can we do—"

"We've got t w e n t y - f o u r hours, haven't we? Empires have fallen in less than that."

Orcutt remained unconvinced. "We cannot attack Tela," he said. "The sheer force of numbers would overwhelm even your crew, Wolf."

"If we attacked openly. Which we shan't do."

"What do you mean?"

"There are times for force, and there are times for strategy. This, I think, is a time for strategy."

ORCUTT shook his head in bewilderment. "I do not understand," he confessed.

"It's pretty obvious, isn't it, that we can't just dive the *Ghost* down on Tela?"

"Yes."

"So we have to figure out another way of fighting. Something that the Lundars can't imagine happening." A pause. "What do you figure they'd least expect, Orcutt?"

The young Dau frowned, then shook his head. "There is nothing we could do that they would not be prepared for, Wolf Stone," he said at last.

A tight grin passed over the Earthman's face.

"I think there is, Orcutt," he declared. "I think there is something so utterly absurd that no Lundar would dream of it happening."

"What is it?"

Again the raider chief grinned.

"I, personally, am going to invade Tela," he announced.

"You mean—"

"I mean that instead of trying to attack the planet openly, I'm going to sneak down in a torpedo ship. I'm going to prowl around a bit and see if I can't dope out a way to get Meersa away from the Lundars. After that we can work on the problem of breaking their control over the planet."

Stark amazement, then new hope, leaped into Orcutt's eyes.

"I shall come with you!" he cried excitedly.

"It would seem like a good idea. You know your way around Tela, and I don't. It would help a lot to have you around."

"Me, too, chief!" grunted Ivar from the background.

Wolf shook his head. "Sorry, Ivar. No dice."

"Huh?" The big Jupiterian peered at the buccaneer leader as if unable to believe his ears. "I don't get it, chief. You ain't got no idea of leaving me here, have you?"

"I'm afraid so, Ivar."

"But—"

"It's got to be that way. In the first place, the torpedo ships carry only two people. In the second, we need someone competent to stay in command of the *Ghost*. Third, there's no disguise in the universe that could make you pass as someone who belonged on Tela; because neither Daus, Lundars, nor Bans have four arms and one eye."

"You'll need help, though, chief. You got to have—"

"If two can't do the job, neither can three, Ivar. No, I'm afraid you'll have to let Orcutt and me handle this assignment."

Orcutt interrupted: "When do we leave?"

"Just as soon as we can get ready. Which should take about fifteen minutes. We've got to work fast."

SOMETHING besides night fell on Tela that evening. For with the dusk, the slim, sinister form of a torpedo ship settled silently to the planet's surface, on that edge of the badlands lying closest to the great capitol city.

"The first thing we must do is to procure Dau clothing for ourselves, and cosmetics with which to whiten your skin." Orcutt explained to Wolf as they climbed out of their tiny craft. "Only then will it be safe to begin our search."

"Right," a g r e e d the Earthman. "Well, let's get going."

"It will be difficult," his companion confessed. "I do not know quite how we can obtain garments."

Wolf grinned. "Where can we find a Dau or two?" he asked. "I'll demonstrate for you."

They had been walking as they talked. Now they found themselves entering the outermost suburb. Ahead of them a Dau hurried toward a ramshackle hovel.

"There's a Dau now!" exclaimed the Earthman.

"Oh, my poor people!" choked Orcutt. He jerked his head toward the shanties. "See how the Lundars force them to live!"

"Come on!" snapped Wolf, breaking into a swift, silent run. "This isn't any time to talk sociology. We've got too much to do."

"What . . ." Orcutt began.

"Shhh!"

On they sped. Then the Dau on the street ahead caught the whisper of their footsteps. He started to turn.

Wolf launched himself through the air like a veritable human projectile. His shoulder crashed into the Dau's legs below the knee in a perfect tackle. The man went down, his shocked cry still sticking in his throat. The next instant the Earthman's fist drove home on the Dau's jaw with a meaty *thunk!*

"O. K.," Wolf clipped. "Get 'em off him. Hurry up!"

"But he is of my people! We cannot rob—"

"Do you think this is a good time for a shopping expedition? We've got work to do! Hurry up!"

Orcutt hastily obeyed, while the Dau whom Wolf had downed groaningly stirred in his coma. A moment later the two adventurers were gone, leaving a shivering, swearing, half-stunned —and definitely naked—victim behind them.

A few minutes later they repeated the process, then held up a shop handling cosmetics to obtain some of the thick, white cream used by Dau women to cover complexion blemishes.

Wolf smeared it on in a nearby alley.

"Now," he announced grimly, "we're ready to start work in earnest. Where's Meersa likely to be?"

His companion meditated for a moment.

"Now that Ra has been destroyed, I do not believe she would be held in the prison we were in formerly," he said finally. "Instead, they probably would have placed her in one of the jails reserved for minor offenders." A pause. "But then they may be keeping her in the Lundar headquarters, or some similar place."

"Is there any way you can find out

definitely?"

"No. I know of none. I asked Niker — who certainly should have known, more than anyone else—and he told me that her hiding-place was being kept a secret by the Lundars to discourage any rescue attempt by our people." The young Dau's face grew gloomy again. "You see we have little chance. The Lundars have done their work well. They are taking no chances on escape this time."

FOR a long moment Wolf Stone stood silent. Then:

"What jail would they probably have her in if they were keeping her in one?"

"The central one. It is in the great Tribunal Hall, where you were brought before Rsk."

"Good." A pause. "What do Daus get put in jail for? Small offenses, that is."

Looking somewhat puzzled, Orcutt answered: "The most common offense is drunkenness. All too many of my people have a taste for *apolosa.*"

"Where can we get some?"

"At any store."

"Then come on. Let's buy some."

"Wait." Orcutt held the Earthman back. "What is it you plan?"

Wolf grinned. "Apparently the only way to find Meersa is to get thrown in jail ourselves. Yet we don't want to be pinched on a serious charge, because that would bring too much investigation and questioning. So I figured a nice, noisy apolosa drunk would do the job."

"But after we are in, we cannot get out!" the stocky Dau protested. "We should have to throw our ray guns away or they would be found when we were searched—"

"Uh-uh." Wolf shook his head. "In the first place, I've been in jail on many a planet, and I've never seen one where a drunk gets searched very thoroughly. Besides, we're going to hide our guns like this—" Raising the flowing, robe-like Dau garment which he wore, he strapped his heavy pistol high between his legs. "That'll pass anything but a complete strip," he explained. "Fix yours the same way."

An hour later the pair was lurching solemnly along the street on which the Tribunal Hall fronted. Wolf carried a big apolosa bottle in his hand.

"Remember, you do the talking," he hissed in last-minute instruction. "My accent isn't any too hot."

Orcutt, the Dau, nodded.

The next instant they came abreast the two giant Lundars who guarded the entrance to the building.

Wolf reared back and stared up at them, beautifully and belligerently drunk. He was a sight to behold. Mud smeared his face and his clothes. Saliva trickled from the corners of his loosely-held lips, to join streams on his chin and thence drip to the ground. A strong aura of apolosa hung about him.

"Go on, now!" one of the guards growled. "Get moving, you drunken scum."

Very deliberately the disguised Earthman spat squarely between the Lundar's feet.

"Why, you—!" The guard started forward, his red eyes glaring.

"You le' my frien' 'lone!" burbled Orcutt soddenly.

The other guard intervened.

"They're drunk," he soothed his comrade. "They don't know what they're doing."

"Well"—the first guard hesitated, caught between two fires—"well, I ought to throw them in. Drunken Daus! They're worse riff-raff than the Bans."

"Who you 'sultin'?" screamed Or-

cutt angrily.

"Yeah!" roared Wolf. He hurled his empty apolosa bottle at the head of the guard who had tried to act as peacemaker.

The guard ducked. "Why, you scum!" he yelped, as the container whistled past his ear. "You want trouble, do you! Well, you'll get it! We'll see how you like spending a few days in jail!"

Suiting his actions to his word, he sprang forward, caught Wolf firmly by the collar and dragged him into the hall. His partner, hauling Orcutt, came close at his heels.

CHAPTER VIII

Quirsts Must Eat

AS WOLF had predicted, the search made of the prisoners was definitely on the superficial side. A burly Lundar sergeant heard the guards' complaints, then promptly consigned the Earthman and his companion to a week in jail. Turned over to another guard, the two were herded down a long corridor toward Tela's equivalent of a drunk tank.

"That door!" Orcutt whispered as the Lundar hurried them along the passageway. He nodded to indicate an impressively solid panel set in the right-hand wall of the hall. "If Meersa's here, she will be on the level to which it leads."

The other gave a great sigh. His legs buckled under him. His muscles no longer functioned. He sprawled on the floor, a sodden heap.

Lipping an oath, the Lundar bent down to pull the disguised Earthman erect. But his hand never touched the prisoner's shoulder.

Instead, Wolf rolled over. His ray gun was in his hand, his eyes suddenly very cold and blue and sober. He thrust the weapon's muzzle against the guard's chest.

"There's a door we want opened," he snapped. "Get moving, if you want to live!"

Close beside him, Orcutt—his gun also now drawn—forced the Lundar back. Together, the two adventurers pressed toward the door.

It was locked.

"Blast it!" Wolf commanded.

Orcutt triggered his ray-gun at the lock, while the buccaneer chief continued to keep the guard covered.

"Wolf! It's broken!"

For the barest fraction of a second, the Earthman's eyes flashed to Orcutt and the now-open door.

"Look out!"

The panic in the stocky Dau's voice sent Wolf swiveling back to the guard like an animated gun turret, every muscle tense, every nerve on edge.

The Lundar had taken advantage of that momentary break in the raider's attention. He was lunging forward, great arms swinging. His red eyes were like pools of blood.

"Stop! You fool!"

On the Lundar came. His ten-inch fingers clutched hungrily for the space pirate's throat.

The Earthman dropped to one knee. His lean face was grim. His finger tightened on the ray gun's trigger.

The Lundar stopped in mid-strike. His face contorted with sudden shock and pain. The breath went out of him in a rush. He pitched forward, onto his face. Wolf jumped aside barely in time to avoid the monster's falling body.

"Wolf! Did he hurt you?"

The raider chief shook his head.

"No," he answered, "but he's messed things up. Now we'll have to work fast."

"What do you mean?"

"Isn't it pretty obvious? If we could have kept him alive, we could have made him go with us. As it is, the minute his body's discovered, the hunt for us will be on."

"YES. I see. What shall we do with him?"

Wolf glanced about. Then:

"There's no place in this corridor to hide him. The only thing we can do is to drag him through this door you just opened. Then we'll shut it and pray that no one has cause to use it. Hurry!"

Together, the pair somehow hauled the Lundar's corpse through the doorway. The portal was at the foot of a stairway. To get the unbelievably heavy body far enough up the steps so that they could close the door at first seemed an impossibility. But at last, straining and tugging, they managed to drag the dead guard inside.

"All right. That's done. Now we've got to rush!"

They sprinted up the stairs. Blasted open another door, at the head, and hurried down a corridor similar to the one below.

"The more important prisoners are on this level," Orcutt explained between gasps as they ran onward. "If Princess Meersa is in the central jail, this is where she should be."

Another door loomed, solid save for a small grated opening near its top.

The young Dau caught Wolf's arm.

"Beyond are cells," he whispered. "In the center corridor a guard is usually stationed."

Wolf glanced up at the portal. Like all the others it was solidly built, and on such a scale as to permit its use by the twelve-foot Lundars.

"That's bad," he clipped. "By the time we could smash that lock with our rayguns, the guard inside would be ready to give us a warm reception."

"If he were alive, no doubt he would," Orcutt retorted grimly. "Give me a leg up, Wolf Stone."

The other eyed him. "You mean to kill him?" he asked.

Orcutt nodded. "Yes. I do not like killing. Not even of Lundars. But when my princess is in danger, it becomes necessary." And then, his face strained: "Come! Help me up! We must hurry."

Wolf lifted him until he could sight his ray gun through the grating. Grimly the young Dau brought the weapon level; squeezed the trigger.

The thud of his feet as he jumped down was echoed by the dull thump of a heavy body falling. A moment later the pair had blasted the lock loose. They hurried into the cell block.

In the center of the floor lay the crumpled form of a dead Lundar guard, while from both sides of the room Daus stared out of their cramped cells at the newcomers. They greeted Orcutt with a chorus of low, joyful cries.

He silenced them with a gesture.

"Where is the Princess Meersa?" he demanded.

FOR a long moment silence hung heavy over the imprisoned natives of Tela. But at last one wrinkled aged Dau broke the tension.

"She is . . . in the tower, Orcutt," he reported in a tone of mourning.

"In the tower!"

The others hung their heads in silent confirmation.

Orcutt's face was terrible to see.

"They have put her in the tower, Wolf!" he cried, as if the other had not heard.

"I got that. But I don't understand what it means. What is the tower?"

"No. You would not know." The stocky Dau licked his lips feverishly. "You see, Wolf Stone, the Lundar gars

must be amused . . . amused by the women of Tela!"

"What?" The Earthman's face showed incredulity. "That doesn't seem possible, Orcutt. After all, the Lundars are twelve feet tall—"

"No, no. You do not understand. The Lundars are not as we; they are themselves sexless. But it pleases them to give Dau girls to the males of other races—the Ban primitives of Suorz, the Ios of the far asteroids. The horror, the struggles, of our women amuse them, then—"

"The damned degenerated, sadistic *gratchs!*" grated Wolf. "I've seen every corner of two solar systems, but never have I heard the like of that!"

He turned on the wrinkled Dau who had told them Meersa was in the tower.

"When did they take her?"

"Only this evening, I believe," came the answer. "Our guard taunted us with it when he came on duty."

Wolf's eyes flashed. "Then there's a good chance we can reach her before . . . anything happens," he snapped. Then, to Orcutt: "How do we get to the tower?"

"There is a lift—what you call an elevator."

"Then let's go!"

"Do not leave us!" cried one of the Daus. "Free us first."

Already moving, the Earthman paused. He tossed his ray gun to the man who had spoken.

"You can burn your way out with this," he clipped. "Don't try to follow us. It's every man for himself now."

Then he and Orcutt were running full-tilt down another corridor.

"The lift is close by here," the young Dau panted. "We must be careful. It is well-guarded."

They rounded a corner—and ran straight into three Lundar guards grouped about the entrance to the monster elevator.

Wolf—unarmed now—hurled himself at the first of the ogrish creatures. The Lundar was standing with his back to the Earthman. Wolf's shoulder crashed into the back of the giant's knees.

The guard sprawled, his legs knocked from under him. His body toppled in front of the second Lundar, now turning to face the attack; sent him, too, staggering. The pair collapsed to the floor in a threshing tangle of huge arms and legs.

But the third giant jumped free. His great red eyes flared as he took in the situation. His hand flashed toward the light gun at his hip.

ORCUTT — spraddle-legged, his stocky body twisted sidewise as he braked himself to a sliding halt —already was bringing up his ray gun. He triggered a spray of death square into the Lundar's face. Watched the giant's jaw sag, his body crumple.

But even as he saw the first enemy go down, he was spinning to face the menace of the other two Lundars.

Wolf was rolling free of the struggling pair on the floor. Somehow, in the chaos, his fingers had clutched a Lundar light gun. Already he was blasting the purple bolts into them.

One of the creatures went limp. The other tried to tear free.

Orcutt's ray gun nailed him through the throat before he could so much as get his feet under him.

Wolf staggered erect. He thrust the light gun he had used into his belt, then fumbled for another among the corpses.

"That was close!" he said. The light of reckless battle was shining in his eyes.

Orcutt nodded. "Yes. But what now?"

"The elevator—can we get it?"

"Yes. These buttons—" The Dau indicated a panel of vari-colored buzzers.

"Get one."

The Dau moved to obey. But before he could reach the panel, the great doors swung back. A Lundar operator gaped out at them.

Wolf and Orcutt fired as one. The giant in the car slammed back against the rear wall, dead before he hit it.

"The Lundars must have rung for him before we came!" breathed Orcutt.

"Yes. Come on." Wolf stepped into the car.

"But what about the bodies?"

"Bodies!" Wolf snarled the word as if it were a curse. "Bodies! Bodies! More bodies! Yes, we'll have to take care of 'em. We've got to stall off pursuit as long as possible."

"Could we perhaps place all of them in the elevator?"

"No. That wouldn't help any." The Earthman stood tense, eyes probing every niche and cranny of the corridor. Then: "Will the elevator work with the doors open?"

"Perhaps. We could try."

A few seconds of frantic experiment revealed that they could hold the car's doors open, yet still raise it a couple of feet above floor level.

"Down the shaft with 'em!" grated the raider chief. "They won't find 'em there for hours."

In less than a minute, the corpses of the Lundars were hurtling into the depths.

Scrambling into the car and closing the doors, Wolf and Orcutt sped upward. At last a flashing light indicated that they had reached the top floor.

"There will be guards here!" warned the young Dau as he gripped the door lever. "We must be ready."

Wolf whipped out the two light guns he had taken from the dead giants. His lean face was hard, his chill eyes filled with menace.

"Let's go!" he clipped.

THE doors swung open.

Two guards spun to face the raiders.

The Earthman's guns belched purple light. The Lundars died.

Together, Wolf and Orcutt sprang from the elevator, half-expecting more trouble from some new angle. But they found no signs of life.

"This is the tower," explained the Dau. "Somewhere on this level we should find Meersa, if she remains alive."

They hurried through one empty room after another. Then, just as the awful qualms of defeat were rising in their hearts, they came upon a locked door.

"Maybe this is it!" Wolf cried. "None of the others have been locked, if that means anything."

They blasted at the lock. Hurled themselves against the stubborn portal.

Suddenly, then, it gave. They plunged into the room beyond.

There, huddled in a sobbing heap on a great divan, lay the one they sought.

"Meersa!" cried Orcutt, springing to her side. He dropped to his knees beside the couch. "My darling, what have they done to you?"

The girl raised her tear-stained face. She stared at her aide. Then at the grim, silent figure of Wolf Stone, still standing in the doorway. Incredulity and joy mingled in her expression. She tried to speak, but her voice betrayed her. Laughing and sobbing at once, her arms sought the young Dau. But even as she clung to him, she gestured the Earthman closer also.

"Oh, my friends!" she gasped at last. "I had given up all hope. Until this evening, when the Lundars

Their guns belched purple light . . . the Lunders died

brought me here to the tower, I kept telling myself that somehow I would be saved. That you would find a way to rescue me.

"Then, quite early, the guards came and dragged me from my cell. They told me that it pleased Rsk to break my pride by giving me to an Io—an awful, slavering beast without a mind; a creature knowing naught but instinctive lust—"

"But they did not do it, Meersa. Tell me they did not do it," begged Orcutt.

The girl's hand caressed his shoulder. She smiled, a wistful tender smile.

"No, my faithful one, they did not do it," she reassured him. "Rsk must be busy, for they have not yet come for me."

She turned to the Earthman. Took his hands in hers.

"Forgive me, Wolf Stone, for doubting you," she begged, adoration shining in her eyes. "Never have I known a man like unto you. In our whole solar system there has never been such a one—"

The hint of a smile touched the adventurer's thin lips. The icy blue eyes softened just a little.

"I pledged my word I'd fight for you and protect you," he said, "and Wolf Stone's word is never broken."

Then:

"But this isn't the time to talk. We're not out of this mess yet—"

"I know." But Meersa's eyes were still on his, her hands still holding him. "I can hardly believe it," she whispered. "That two men could somehow fight their way to me—"

"Come on!" Wolf interrupted. "I'm sorry, Princess, but we've got to hurry."

And then from the doorway behind them, came a voice as cold and deadly as the clang of hell's own doors:

"No, do not hurry. First you must taste my hospitality!"

It was the voice of Rsk, gar of all the Lundars!

EVEN as he whirled, Wolf's hands flashed toward the guns hanging heavy in his belt. But he had forgotten that Meersa still clung to him. Her grip slowed him the fraction of a second in his draw.

Perhaps it was as well; had his guns come up he would have died where he stood. For Rsk stood squarely in the middle of the big doorway, and flanking him on either side was a Lundar guard with drawn light-gun.

Now they moved forward, and one of the guards relieved Wolf and Orcutt of their weapons, while the second kept the raiders and Meersa covered.

Another Lundar followed Rsk into the room. It was Znz, his pale, sinister face alight with evil joy.

"You should not have helped the Daus below to escape, Wolf Stone!" he gloated. "Like the clumsy fools they are, they stumbled into the hands of our guards before they had even gotten off their own levels. We knew without asking, then, where we could find you. Eh, Rsk?"

But the giant gar's original words apparently had exhausted his self-control. Now he was almost trembling with rage. His voice quavered with fury.

"You chitzas!" he raved. "You starbos! Once I said I'd make you pray for death. And now I will! The three of you together, I'll watch you die. Oh, what agonies you'll suffer—"

His hate was awful to behold. Meersa, her eyes wide with undisguised terror, clung to Orcutt. The young Dau, in turn, held her close to him. But his own face was taut with strain and he licked his dry lips nervously with the tip of his tongue.

Not Wolf Stone.

Contemptuously the raider chief eyed the Lundar gar and sub-gar from head to toe. Not a sign of fear crept into the blue diamond chips that were his eyes. No tremor of panic racked his lean frame. He stood before them, reckless and defiant, with his thumbs hooked into the broad belt that girded in his flowing robe-like Dau garment, and a mocking, daredevil's smile twisting his mouth.

"You'll die a separate death for every Lundar who perished on Virna!" raged Rsk. "Yes, and on Ra, too!" A pause. Then: "Well, you chitza, do you fear to speak? Is your throat too dry with terror to give out words?"

Wolf laughed in his face.

"Do I look afraid?" he demanded with a sneer that sent the gar into new spasms of fury. "Do I look like the kind of a cowardly dog who'd crawl on his knees to you for mercy? So why should I give you the satisfaction of answering you?

"But one thing I'll tell you, Rsk. One piece of advice I'll give you: kill us now, while you've got the chance, if you want to live yourself.

"Once before you swore you'd kill me, but I got away. I wiped out two of your planets, and I set your puny, puling empire rocking on its heels.

"Give me another chance, and I'll knock it down around your ears like a glass house in an earthquake. I'll quit bothering with subordinates, and concentrate on killing you, yourself, Rsk, and that crawling traitor, Znz, that stands behind you—"

"I'll give you your chance to die!" screamed Rsk. "Right now, I'll give you your chance." And, to the guards: "Take him below! Take them all! To the zoo with them!"

Watchful and deadly, the guards herded the captives out of the room. Across the anteroom into the elevator.

TWENTY levels lower, they left the car again. Went down a corridor. Through the Tribunal Hall's vast museum wing. Past exhibits ranging from specimens of primitive Ban beadwork, to a huge, carefully insulated chunk of radioactive ore from the pits of Ra, to the delicate, beautiful products of skilled Dau metal workers.

And, at last, out of the museum and into the zoo, where the Lundars had gathered specimens of the wild life of every planet, every asteroid, in this entire solar system—*peens,* hideous, pterodactyl-like, with monstrous, bony wings; *gratchs,* blind, burrowing, mole-like; *yakos, stongs, jeors . . .*

But still the party continued. Past one cage after another. Until finally they reached a section where a strange stench assailed their nostrils. And there they stopped.

"Quirsts," choked Meersa in a voice that trembled with loathing.

"Quirsts!" echoed the gloating tones of Rsk.

The group was standing behind a railing. Ten feet beyond it were the bars of a cage. Straining his eyes, Wolf peered at the creatures within the den. When he saw them, his stomach nearly rose in revolt.

Nowhere in the length and breadth of two solar systems, had he seen the like. Hideous with warts and scales, these snake-like things had *arms!* Tiny, perfectly developed, almost human arms! They darted about their cage like flashes of light, glaring malevolently out at the intruders with beady reptilian eyes. Like every other creature in this strange solar system, their color was a fish-belly white, result of the sun's deficiency in various rays.

The Earthman fought down the nausea that swirled within him. When he spoke, his voice was steady.

"So these are quirsts!" he remarked

interestedly. And, to the Lundars: "Just how are our fates linked with theirs?"

It was Znz who answered. His tone surged with triumph.

"Even quirsts must eat!" he said.

CHAPTER IX

Pirate Payoff

"THE quirst is poisonous," the sub-gar went on, gloatingly. "So poisonous that even their breaths can sometimes bring death. They will strike at any living thing, and without provocation. Paralysis is immediate, but death—a death in agony, I might add—is slow in coming. When you and your Dau friends are placed inside that cage, Wolf Stone"—he rubbed his hands together with unholy glee—"these creatures will swarm over you, clutching you, biting you, gnawing at you. They are hungry, Wolf Stone—"

"I've been bitten by snakes before," the Earthman retorted caustically, "but none as slimy as you, Znz. Now I'll have a chance to see if these quirsts you're so proud of can match you."

The sub-gar tensed at the jibe.

"You'll sing a different song when you face the quirsts!" he snarled. "You and this Orcutt and the tender Princess Meersa you're so fond of—"

"No!" cried Orcutt aloud. His whole body was shaking. "No! Not Meersa! Do what you want with us, Znz, but free Meersa—"

"Shut up!" slashed Wolf. "Would you crawl in front of these gorillas for any cause? We'll go, and we'll go together, and to hell with them, one and all!"

He vaulted the low rail that held visitors a safe distance from the cages. Meersa climbed after him, her lovely pale face as proudly defiant as his own. Orcutt brought up the rear.

"Good girl!" the raider chief muttered in Meersa's ear as he helped her over. And, to Orcutt: "On your toes! The cards aren't all down yet!"

Now one of the guards came forward. He had donned a strange garment resembling a flying suit. Moving up to the door of the cage, he grasped the lever.

"Come on!" he growled.

Never had Wolf Stone appeared more swaggering and defiant than at that moment. But there was a cold sheen of sweat over his forehead, and his mouth felt parched and cottony.

He approached the cage. Not a detail missed his cold-eyed scrutiny, and every impression was torn to frantic shreds by the fine mechanism of his brain as he searched past and present and future, and the whole universe, for even the slightest hope.

The quirsts, he noted, were only eight inches long, but they moved with a speed and deadliness that made the cobra's strike seem lackadaisical. The bars of their cage were covered with mesh netting in fine testimony to the creatures' dangerous character, while the door had a two-foot-high sill beneath it—complete with down-slanting guard spikes on the inside—to prevent their climbing out, even should the door itself accidentally be left open.

A sudden light gleamed in the adventurer's eyes. He bared his teeth in a savage grin.

"Why do you move so slowly, Wolf Stone?" jibed Znz.

"Yes!" taunted Rsk. "What's wrong, brave man? Get into the cage and die!"

The Lundar in the strange suit swung open the door of bars.

Wolf clenched his teeth. He could feel a rill of icy sweat go trickling down his back. Drawing a deep breath, breathing a silent prayer, he stepped

toward the open door—and carefully stumbled over his own feet.

IT WAS well done. Rsk and Znz howled with ghoulish laughter. And Wolf careened violently into Meersa and Orcutt. The force of his blow shoved them sideways, toward the hinge side of the cage door.

Now he was ready. Now the stage was set. Wolf could feel the blood drain from his face. But he strode forward.

Then, so suddenly it was hard to follow, he struck.

Like lightning, he sprang behind the Lundar. His shoulder crashed into the giant's hip. At the same instant, his foot came down in front of those of the guard.

An ancient trick. But always a good one. The Lundar tripped. Pitched forward. Plunged headlong—under the directive and impetus of the raider's heave—over the doorsill and into the quirsts' cage.

Even as the Lundar toppled, Wolf sprang clear. In one wild leap he was across the falling giant's body. His arm caught Meersa and Orcutt. Slammed them back against the cage, close beside the door's hinges. Simultaneously he caught the locking lever. Swung the door wide open and on back, against the three of them, like a protective shield against the quirsts.

From beginning to end, the maneuver had taken less than three seconds. Seconds while Rsk and Znz and the second guard stood paralyzed with disbelief and shock.

But now, suddenly, they realized what the buccaneer chief had done—

Across the prone body of the fallen Lundar, sprawled over the doorsill, half in the cage and half out, the quirsts were leaping!

Over the human bridge they came, out of the cage and into the aisleway. Swarming, scurrying, squirming, in a torrent of sudden death.

Shrieking in panic, Rsk, Znz, and the guard fled, their prisoners forgotten. But not far. Nothing alive could outdistance those hideous, awful creatures that came after, tiny arms outstretched, in an insatiable kill-lust.

Gar, sub-gar, and guard—they went down almost together, the little Suorzian monsters nipping and clawing at their heels and legs. In less than half a minute their great bodies were mottled with the creatures.

Meersa buried her horror-distraught face against Orcutt's broad shoulder.

"Into the cage!" snapped Wolf. "It's empty now, but those devils will be back for us in a few seconds."

They clambered inside, the Earthman pausing barely long enough to snatch the light gun from the stunned Lundar whose body still lay sprawled across the doorsill.

"Now help me dump him outside," Wolf ordered. "His suit apparently protects him from the quirsts' bites."

A moment later, that job done, they swung the door closed.

And barely in time, too.

THE quirsts were coming back. Like foul figments of an evil imagination, they gathered around the cage, their beady little eyes gleaming with blood lust.

Even Wolf Stone shuddered.

"Here's hoping that story about even their breaths being poisonous is just superstition," he remarked.

Orcutt, staring out at the creatures in horrid fascination, nodded shakily and held Meersa the tighter.

"Yes," he agreed. "I, too, pray you are right." A pause. "But now, Wolf, how do we escape?"

"Have we but escaped one menace

to be trapped by another?" echoed Meersa. "We cannot leave, or we will meet the fate of those . . . out there." Her eyes indicated the lumps of lifeless flesh that had been the Lundars.

"No." Wolf shook his head. He raised the light gun he had taken from the guard. "We'll see how those devils like a spray of this."

He triggered the weapon. Purple light washed between the bars of the cage. Broke over the quirsts in a wave of death. They dropped like flies. Yet such was their strange mentality that the survivors of that first blast, instead of fleeing, rushed close to nuzzle obscenely at their fallen fellows. Within three minutes, the last lay dead.

The Earthman swung open the cage door.

"We're free!" he cried. "Lundars and quirsts alike, we've beaten them!"

"I can hardly believe it!" whispered Princess Meersa. "I feel as if it were all a dream—half nightmare, half glorious vision."

"I know," agreed the raider chief. He walked over to where the corpses of Rsk and Znz and the guard lay, stared down at them for a moment in silence. Then:

"Look at them—Rsk and Znz, gar and sub-gar of all the Lundars! An hour ago they were the most powerful pair in the whole universe, from the sun to the farthest asteroid. Intelligent. Strong. Honored by their own people. Feared by all others.

"But now they're dead. Gone down before a herd of stinking slavering quirsts—crawling creatures, physically weak, practically without brains. Yet against them, Lundar power and intelligence didn't count."

The Earthman paused, shook his head slowly. His eyes were somber.

"If I were a philosopher, I might draw some kind of a truth from that—"

"Wolf! The guard!"

It was Orcutt's voice. The raider chief stopped in mid-breath. He whirled.

The other Lundar guard, the one in the protective suit whom Wolf had shoved through the cage door, was on his feet once more. On his feet and moving—running full-tilt for the zoo door that led into the museum.

LIKE a flash, the buccaneer was lunging in pursuit. But his legs could not match the twelve-foot giant's strides. By the time the Earthman had reached the entryway, the Lundar already was sprinting out the other side of the museum, far out of range of light gun fire.

Orcutt and Meersa ran up behind Wolf. The raider turned on them.

"He'll be back!" he snapped. "He, and every Lundar in the place with him."

"We must flee to the central port!" Orcutt exclaimed. "There we can seize some kind of space ship and escape to the *Ghost*."

"No."

"What? You do not want to escape, Wolf Stone?"

The space pirate's lean face was hard. "I want to get away as much as anyone," he snapped grimly, "but I want to be sure we've accomplished something, too. And if we leave now, the Lundars will still be in control on Tela. We've got to break their power."

"Yes. Of course. But how?"

There was a long moment of silence while Wolf restlessly paced the floor, his blue eyes worried beneath their chill. Then suddenly a grim smile sprang to his lips.

"The Tribunal Hall is the Lundar headquarters on Tela, right?"

Orcutt nodded. "Yes."

"Then if we could destroy the Hall,

and all the Lundars in it, their control would be pretty well shot?"

This time Meersa answered.

"You are right, Wolf Stone," she said, at the same time glancing nervously toward the museum door through which guards might at any moment come charging.

"Come on, then! We've got work to do!" And, to Orcutt: "Bar that door! We're going to need a couple of minutes to work this."

While the two Daus watched in baffled wonderment, the Earthman worked frantically. Switching off the lights—now, since Ra's destruction, electric-powered—, he stripped wires bare.

There was a thundering at the door. Roars of a hundred Lundar guardsmen.

"Hold them, Orcutt!" shouted the buccaneer. "Give me another minute!"

The stocky Dau sprang to obey. He blasted at the giants through crevices with a light gun. For the moment forced them back.

Working like mad, Wolf now attacked the insulation surrounding the great chunk of radioactive ore from Ra which formed one of the museum's central displays. He tore and blasted it away. Lashed a dozen of the light wires about the rock.

The Lundars again were smashing at the portal.

WOLF lunged across the hall. He ripped a long strip of cloth from his own clothing. Used it to connect the door at which the giants were battering with the light switch in such a way that the opening of the panel would turn on the power. He finished the job with a jerk. Then spun about.

"This way!" he gasped, panting with exertion. "Hurry! We can't lose a second!"

Away he dashed, running at top speed for the entrance to the zoo. Meersa and Orcutt were close on his heels.

Into the zoo they sprinted. Down its long central aisle.

Half a dozen Lundars loomed before them.

"A patrol!" gasped Orcutt. "They must have come in the back way!"

His words were drowned in Wolf Stone's snarl. Already the Earthman's light gun was blazing. The first two of the giants went down before its blast.

Then Orcutt and Meersa, too, were firing. Two more Lundars died. The remaining pair fled madly for the exit, Wolf and the young Daus in hot pursuit.

They were out of the Tribunal Hall, now. Sprinting for the entrance to the great central port a few hundred yards away. Other Lundars rose to oppose them—and died or fled.

The trio raced up stairways. Down runways.

"That space ship!" roared Wolf. "It's the old type! It'll take off without broadcast power! Run for it!"

Panting and exhausted, they half-scrambled, half-fell aboard. Orcutt snatched at the controls. With a roar the craft hurtled down the runway. Burst out into the sky.

The next instant the little ship was rocking like a paper boat in a windstorm. It careened through space in a wild rigadoon.

Meersa, her eyes brimming with panic, clutched at the two men.

"What is it?" she cried. "What happened?"

Wolf gave her hand a steadying squeeze.

"It just means my scheme worked," he told her.

"Your scheme—?"

"Yes. You see, that damned radioactive ore from Ra is wildly unstable. That's why electrolytic action always

turned it into pure energy.

"I figured that if that was the case, maybe short-circuiting a lighting system through it would explode it the same way. So I fixed it so the breaking down of that door to the museum would switch on the lights. It must have worked—because the Tribunal Hall and the Lundars in it are gone!"

The girl's eyes followed the finger he pointed at the telescreen.

Where once the great building had stood, now hovered only a fog of dust and smoke!

IVAR said: "The chief? Sure, he's a swell guy. All aces."

"Yes, I know he is." Meersa sighed and tried again. "But . . . was he really a pirate in this other solar system from which you came? Did he kill and steal—"

The big Jupiterian grinned. "He didn't do nothing else but," he declared. "The Interplanetary Police classed him with acts of God—said they was both disasters. Why, I remember one time we was raiding Neptune—"

Again the Dau princess sighed.

"I wonder why he did it," she said softly. "To me he has been so kind—and yet, a pirate . . ."

"Us pirates ain't so bad," defended Ivar. "We got a lot of good guys. After all, lady, there's some awful goons running our neck of the woods. Why you think Wolf turned raider in the first place?"

"Why did he?" Meersa asked eagerly, her lovely face anxious.

"It was his old man," the other explained. "He was quite a guy, too. A scientist. But some big shot in the Interplanetary Federation got down on him. Killed him and all his family. Only Wolf got away. He was just a kid, but he managed to get to the outer asteroids—the I. P. hadn't mopped up there yet, in them days.

"Well, when he growed up, he was in on a couple of revolutions. But no revolution had the chance of a space ship landing on the sun. Not with the I. P. on the job. So finally Wolf just blasted around from one planet to another, making all the trouble he could for the Federation. Believe me, lady, a lot of folks hadn't never had a square meal 'til Wolf knocked off the garrison over 'em and opened up the storehouses. There's plenty of places where they just about pray to him—"

"Ivar! You mean he was forced to be a pirate? That always he helped the oppressed as he helped us against the Lundars?"

The mate was aggrieved. "Sure. Ain't that what I been telling you all along? Wolf's a swell guy—"

"Oh, Ivar! I am so happy!"

The girl was radiant in her joy. Turning, she darted from the bewildered Jupiterian's presence. Ran down the corridor to Wolf's cabin.

The raider chief was working over a huge celestial chart. He glanced up as the princess came in. Smiling, he motioned her to a chair.

"Sit down, Meersa. Well, how's it going, now that things are on an even keel on Tela again, and you're back in the saddle?"

Meersa ignored the seat. Instead she stood before him, her lovely face just a little strained. Her fingers knotted nervously into small fists.

"Wolf Stone," she said, I must talk to you."

Again he smiled.

"Talk ahead."

SHE swallowed hard, searched her brain for the right words. Her eyes dropped. She bit her lip. Then, in an almost embarrassed little voice:

"It is not good that a woman should

rule Tela alone, Wolf."

She hesitated, but the Earthman made no move to interrupt. At last she went on.

"There should be a strong man beside me, Wolf. A man like you, to watch over my people . . . and over me."

Still the raider chief said nothing. There was a long moment of uncomfortable silence. At last the girl could stand it no longer. She raised her eyes. They were hurt and angry, and filled with tears. Her lower lip quivered.

"Can you not speak, Wolf Stone?" she cried. "Am I so ugly you cannot endure the thought of me? Must you make me shame myself by telling you that I want you; that I must have you; that I am asking you to marry me and rule beside me?"

The Earthman walked slowly across the cabin, then turned to face her, hands locked behind him, feet wide apart. His lean brown face was no longer hard; only weary. And the blue eyes that had been so cold and menacing now were filled with pain.

"I'm sorry, Meersa," he said, and his voice was old and tired.

"What does that mean, Wolf Stone?" she flared. "Am I not good enough—"

"Please!" He raised his hand to silence her. Ran long fingers through the jet black of his hair. At last: "Meersa, do you realize what I am?"

The anger went out of the girl as quickly as it had come.

"I—I do not understand," she stammered.

"I'm not a king, Meersa. I'm a pirate. 'Scum of the spaceways,' the Interplanetary Police call my men and me. And they're not too far wrong—"

"But that is all past!" the princess broke in passionately. "You were a pirate, yes. But it was in another world. You were forced to it. Ivar told me—"

"Forced to it?" The buccaneer leader threw her a twisted smile. "At first, maybe. But you don't play Robin Hood forever, Meersa. You get so you raid for the thrill of raiding, and for the loot, just as if you were a *Malya* from the outer asteroids—"

"But it is past!" she repeated fiercely. "Forget all that—"

"It isn't past. It can never be past."

"What?" Meersa was bewildered. "I do not see—"

Again the Earthman paced the room, teeth clenched, breathing hard.

"You don't forget the past!" he exclaimed suddenly. "You can't. For years my meat and drink have been action—action—action. I've roved two universes. Fought on more planets than I can count. Lived on excitement.

"How do you think I'd fit into being king on a planet likeTela? How do you think I'd enjoy playing guardian to you and your people? I'll tell you, Meersa: I'd go stark, staring mad within a year. I'd hate you all, and I'd abuse you. I'd be a worse dictator than Rsk ever dreamed of being.

"Not because of anything you'd do, either. No. But I couldn't stand the very peace of it all."

"Then what—"

WOLF'S hand swept out in a gesture toward the celestial charts. "I've seen it coming. For the past week the men have been getting the *Ghost* ready to travel again. Right now I'm only waiting for some final figures."

"And what of me?" choked the girl. "Do I go on until my time is come, ruling Tela by myself and hating every lonely minute?"

The raider chief gripped her shoulders.

"Why should you?" he demanded, looking deep into her tear-filled eyes. "You've got a man."

"I? A man? Who?"

"Orcutt."

"Orcutt! That boy! When I compare him with you—"

"When you compare him with me, you should thank your lucky stars that you're fortunate enough to have him, my little princess. That boy loves you. He'd cut his own heart out if he thought it would please you. He has a steady head on his shoulders, and brains to fill it. He'll make a king you and your people can be proud of—"

The cabin door opened. Moko, the Uranian scientist, followed by Ivar, entered. The little savant waved a sheaf of papers triumphantly.

"I've got it!" he cried. "I've worked out everything. The whole formula. Route's all planned."

Wolf turned to Ivar.

"What about the supplies?" he demanded. "Is everything on board?"

"The whole works, chief," the big mate nodded. "Crew's on, too."

"Then prepare to blast off!"

"Huh? Now?"

"You heard me! We're leaving. Get a move on!"

Meersa gripped the Earthman's arm. "Wolf! You cannot—"

"On the contrary." He lifted her off her feet, carried her to the forward hatch.

"Good luck, Meersa. Say good-bye to Orcutt for me. And may you and Tela always prosper!"

He set her down on the runway. The hatch swung shut.

She was still standing there, watching the *Ghost* fade into space, when Orcutt ran up.

"They've gone?" he gasped incredulously.

"Yes."

The young Dau stood close behind her, his eyes—like hers—glued on the blurring dot against the sky. His arms slipped about her waist; she did not pull away.

"There goes a man!" he said.

And Meersa nodded.

THE END

(Continued from page 6)

EDITORS are generally a hard headed lot. They take an awful lot of pounding from the readers before they make any changes in their magazine. But when you keep on asking for something, we begin to tumble to the fact you really want it, and finally we give it to you. Which is what has happened in this case. For years you readers have requested us to reprint favorite stories of the past. We have preferred to give you all new material. But in this issue, and in a few following, we'll accede to your demands, and give it a whirl. The new department will be known as "Amazing Classics" and will feature reprints of stories of the past which have earned your acclaim.

WAY back in November 1938 a fellow named Thornton Ayre presented a story called "The Secret of the Ring." You readers still praise it, and we feel that we are making no mistake in presenting this story as our "Amazing Classic" for this month. It begins on page 64 Incidentally, it features the original illustration by Robert Fuqua, and we think it is still one of the finest he has done.

AFTER you've read this month's classic, drop us a line and let us know which story you'd prefer to see given honors in our next issue. We want to be sure we don't miss the story you really want to read. And those of you who are new readers, and there are many of you, can be sure that you are getting the cream of the crop of the past. It was on stories such as "The Secret of the Ring" that AMAZING STORIES' reputation as "the aristocrat" was established.

IN our December issue we are going to break our newly established policy of publishing long stories complete, if possible, by giving you the first of two instalments of a new novel by Howard Browne, called "Warrior of the Dawn." This is the longest story we have ever presented, and we think one of the most fascinating action stories of the Cro-Magnon age ever written. It is packed with suspense; its characters live and breathe right before your eyes; its plot socks you in the jaw at every turn. We, the editors, think that Mr. Browne

has created something that will make even the great Edgar Rice Burroughs green with envy. Don't miss it!

BECAUSE the story is what it is, we have called in J. Allen St. John to do the cover for it In our opinion he is the only man who can capture the true artistic flavor of a story of this kind and picture the Cro-Magnon age as it must have been.

THE other day one of our science fiction themes came true in a literal manner. Stories of "test tube" babies have appeared often in our pages. Now science has a test tube baby!

The distinction of being the first "test tube" calf in the United States goes to Shawmut Sally Queen, owned by Richard S. Shomp of Stanton, N J. The experiment was supervised by the New Jersey Agricultural Experiment station which is attempting to produce a better strain of dairy cattle. The parents of the calf have never even seen each other as insemination was performed artificially

This event will soon be "stale" news, however, for the station now has almost 3,000 cows in its breeding unit and "test tube" calves will be arriving daily. Again we repeat, if you want to know what the future will bring, read AMAZING STORIES! We dream 'em up, and the scientists make 'em come true!

CONCERNING the female of the species, an odd fact comes to light which confirms a suspicion we've entertained for a long time.

The male angler fish never grows longer than two inches, while the female often grows as long as three feet.

Maybe there is something in the old saying that 'she fished for him until he caught her!"

SPEAKING of angling brings us to the subject of fishing And fishing sometimes means fish, although usually we never get any bites. Anyway, here's something about a fish . . .

Unlike the rest of his family of killers and marauders, the whale shark is a very calm and easy-going fish. Although he is the largest of all fish, he does not go in for attacking ships or fishermen like his many cousins do. In fact, according to fishermen off the California coast, there are recorded cases where fishermen have gone from their boats and walked on the back of the whale shark without even disturbing him.

The tuna fishers off Lower California have found that the presence of a whale shark usually indicates that a school of yellow-fin tuna is very near, putting them on the alert for signs of the huge fish. When the whale shark is sighted, the fishermen pull alongside and proceed to haul in the valuable tuna. The whale shark does not resent their presence even if the boat bumps into him Of course, the whale shark is considered an outcast by the other members of the shark family, but that doesn't seem to bother him very much.

Next time we sight a whale shark, we intend to prove or disprove this scientific fact—we intend to step from our boat and walk about on the back of this placid fellow! Honest we do! Honest. . . .

THE oldest textbook to be used in schools outside of the bible is Euclid's geometry, which is over 2,200 years old

We wish statisticians would quit bringing up stuff like this. More interesting to us is the fact that outside of the bible, AMAZING STORIES is the oldest science fiction book in the world. Since 1926 we have been foretelling the future. No other science fiction magazine can make that claim. Listen to us brag, will you!

NEXT month we will present another Juggernaut Jones story by A R McKenzie. In this one the little interplanetary salesman is an expressman, and he manages to convey a lot of stuff from here to there in a quite amazing manner. You'll enjoy this blithe little story of the fellow who can sell anything, anywhere, including water to fish already swimming in an ocean of it!

DELVING into strange races this month we find a very interesting tribe of people living in southeastern Ceylon, who have sometimes been regarded as a separate race of mankind. They are one of the most primitive of human types, representing, perhaps, the original stock which gave rise to the Australians

This race, called the Veddas, resemble the Hindus in appearance. Their hair is jet black, wavy, or curly—never kinky. They are of slender build, erect carriage, and small stature. The full-grown male is about five feet.

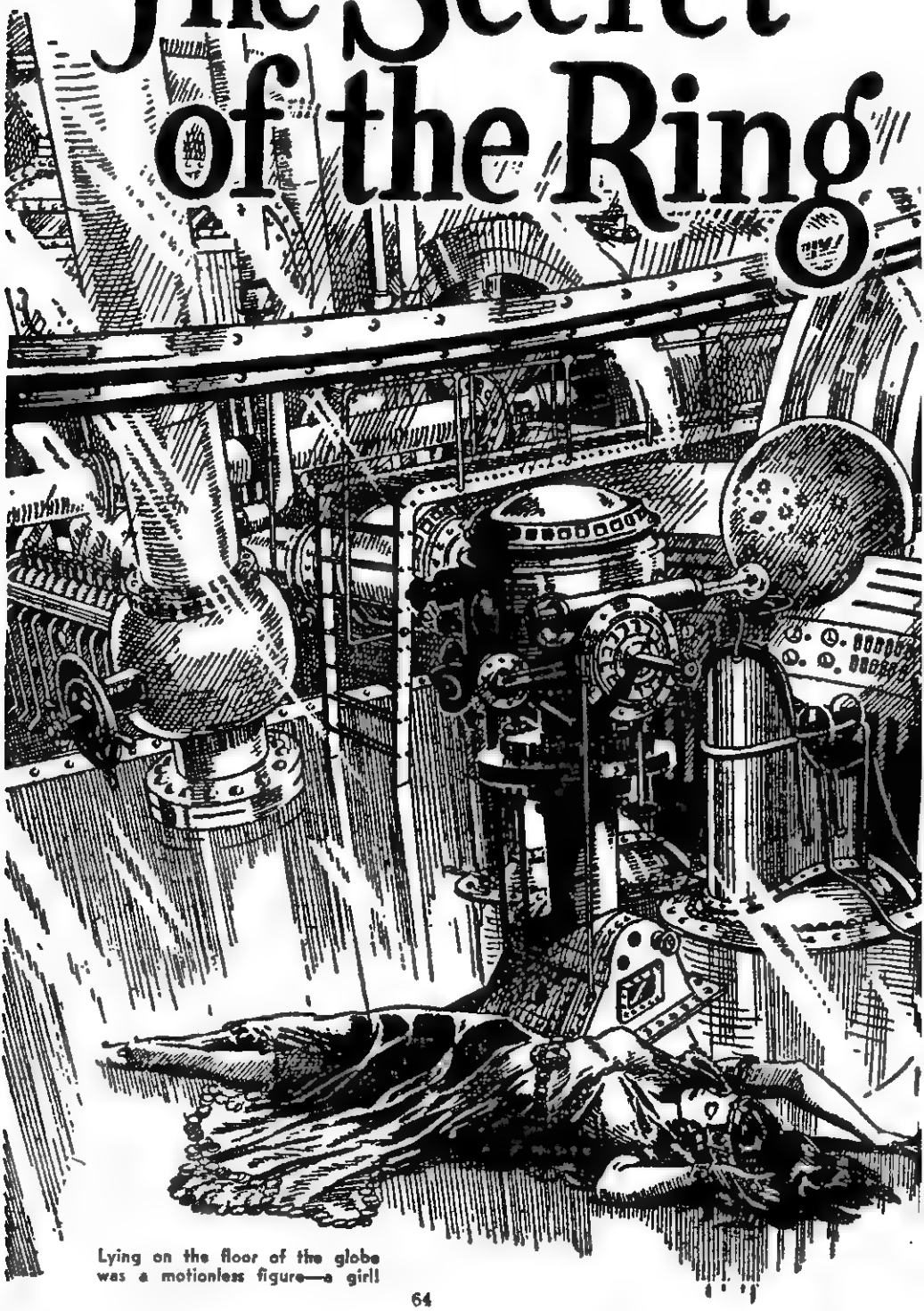
The Veddas are praised for honesty, hospitality, morality, and good nature. A noteworthy characteristic is their monogamous form of marriage. They have primitive songs and dances; their religious ideas center in a cult of the dead. They use the fire drill and make bows and arrows. They have written charms, and occasionally a palm-leaf book serving as an oracle or fetish.

The Village Veddas are largely vegetarians, but the Rock Veddas hunt birds and animals. Those still existing are divided into three classes The Coast Veddas of Batticaloa, who have some civilization and associate freely with their neighbors. The Village Veddas of the wooded lowlands who are nomadic harvesters of the jungle products, build rude huts, and collect into family groups. The most primitive and secluded are the Rock Veddas. They live chiefly by hunting, and do not associate in a tribal life, but band together only in small family groups

In addition to producing the Australians in the south, this race is believed to have started the Dravidian peoples of southern Hindustan in the north.

(Continued on page 92)

The Secret of the Ring



Lying on the floor of the globe was a motionless figure—a girl!

This Amazing Classic originally appeared in the November 1938 issue

By THORNTON AYRE

Great storms and quakes threaten civilization. Science is baffled until Terry Marsden uncovers an incredible mystery in the Sahara

BENEATH a sky darkened to twilight gloom with lowering, scudding clouds, battling into the teeth of blinding rain, Elsa Dallaway made her way to the Receiving Station of the Dallaway Stratosphere Corporation. A shower of drops, a triumphant screech of wind, then she was inside, dripping water onto the spotless wooden floor.

"Whew!" she gasped, tearing off her sou'-wester and patting disturbed masses of black hair into place. "Another glorious day, Terry!"

Terry Marsden did not look around, or answer. Surprised, the girl glanced at his broad, gray shirted back and blond head. The sight of clamped earphones explained the reason. A brown hand was operating the radio apparatus.

Terry became aware of her presence as the electric light caught the huge, queer stone of the ring on her right hand. Somehow one always became

conscious of Elsa Dallaway by that ring before coming to look at the girl herself. It picked up light in startling chromatism.

"Oh, it's you!" Terry tugged off the phones and threw them down, smiled up at the girl. "I was just listening to the record of disasters coming through . . ." He paused, his deep blue eyes serious. "Elsa, do you realize that it has been raining now for twelve days and nights without ceasing?" he asked ominously.

"It does seem a long time since I had a sunshade out," the girl admitted.

"It's getting darned serious! First the great Chinese earthquake which upset the atmosphere so badly that the weather fell to pieces. Then the eruption of Vesuvius; and on top of that the complete explosion of Stromboli's crater. Thousands of lives wiped out, oceans heaving up, land sliding down—Tempests and tornados . . . and the rain . . ."

Terry stared at the gloomy window as the screaming wind hurled the deluge against it.

"The Mississippi overflowing and the Hudson rising hourly," the girl finished with a sigh. "Yes, Terry, it is all very terrible— But it'll stop!" she added brightly. "It always does. Just a disturbed spell, that's all."

"Hope so. . . ." Terry glanced up at her quickly. "Incidentally, what brought the wealthy owner of the Dallaway Corporation to see her ace pilot? Not the weather, surely?"

"No. I dropped in to tell you that you're liable to be without relief during the lunch hour and will have to hang on here. We just got the news that Carlton was involved in an auto accident this morning— So bang goes your chance of relief man."

"You could have phoned that news to me."

"Oh, sure—but I couldn't have phoned you your lunch." Elsa smiled naively. "Besides, this seemed as good an opportunity as any to have a few moments with you."

Terry chuckled, got to his feet and held the girl in his arms. Steadily he looked into her clear gray eyes.

"You know, you're the living proof of the fact that business and pleasure can mix," he said at last. "Gosh, Elsa, if anything were to happen to you I'd go nuts!"

"Why wait for something to happen to me?" she smiled.

"Ouch! But on the level, I—"

Terry broke off, immediately businesslike again as the short wave radio, directly contacted with the Department of Public Safety at Washington, burst into life. Quickly he switched from headphones to loudspeaker.

"Attention all air pilots and stratosphere fliers! Orders from the President! All heavy type storm airplanes will prepare for take off in sixty minutes, will leave fully equipped with storm recording apparatus. You will travel from New York to Los Angeles and back again, determining as you go exactly what air currents and velocities are in force. Detailed analysis of abnormal weather conditions must begin immediately . . .

"Stratosphere Corporation pilots! You will ascend to the hundred mile limit and take a detailed survey of conditions, together with full recording of cosmic wave intensity in an endeavor to discover if cosmic waves are in any way responsible for the present conditions. Your findings, when made, will be immediately forwarded to the Science Analysis Department of Public Safety. That is all."

Elsa glanced at Terry in startled wonderment as the order ended.

"Say, things must be pretty bad to

demand such measures!" she exclaimed. "And from the President himself, too!"

"Of course they're bad! If rain and tidal waves don't let up soon the whole of civilization is going to be inundated —believe me!" Terry paused, rubbed his chin worriedly. "This is going to be awkward. I'll have to go up, of course, but now Carlton's out of action I'm without a relief assistant. . . . Maybe Davies will do."

He moved to the headquarters telephone, then turned surprisedly as Elsa caught his arm.

"Reporting for duty, sir!" she said with mock stiffness, saluting.

"Huh? Hang it all, Elsa —"

"Oh, break down!" she expostulated. "Haven't I been told everything there is to know about our stratosphere globes? Didn't dad drill it all into me before he died? I'll make a better flight assistant than anybody—and nobody can say anything when I'm the head of the entire Corporation."

Terry hesitated a moment, then nodded quickly and patted her arm.

"Good girl! Nobody I'd rather go with, of course. I'll have Davies come here to the radio instead. Hang on here while I tell the boys they'll be wanted."

He hurried into his flying kit, went out into the raging storm with a shower of raindrops and slamming door.

CHAPTER II

Tragedy

THE STRATOSPHERE CORPORATION, founded in 1950 by Douglas Dallaway, himself the creator of the first practicable stratosphere globe, had in its fifteen years of progress produced an army of scientific pilots whose motto was—progress and obedience.

The huge organization, maintaining a constant air service in the higher levels of the atmosphere, together with a perpetual Government contract for the carrying of express mails, entirely respected the orders of Elsa Dallaway as chief of the concern. Terry, for his part, as the ace pilot, was undisputed boss of the engineering and flying side of the business.

His orders to the pilots in the mess rooms were accepted without questions, even though the danger of flying in such weather was pretty considerable. Though it was mid-day, the gloom outside resembled that of late evening, clouds hanging low, rain sweeping down in torrents, into the midst of which gradually moved the huge stratosphere machines from their hangars.

Terry used his own machine, equipped with the new Hawkins-Wilson firing cylinders, and thereby able to ascend into the higher levels of the atmosphere at enormous speed. . . . By the time the sixty minutes were up he and the girl were seated in the small, circular control chamber, their scientific instruments grouped around them. At Terry's radio signal the other globes of the squadron began to rise into the midst of the howling storm.

Terry watched them critically for a moment, then turned to his own controls, released the electric circuit which fired the undertubes. Instantly the globe swept smoothly upward in a straight line, held firmly by a master hand on the controls amidst the buffetings of the tempest, increasing every foot of the way.

Rain swamped against the windows as Terry and the girl stared fixedly out on the approaching ceiling of angry nimbus. Wind screamed wildly in every tiny crevice of the globe. . . . Then they went through the midst of the nimbus and the rain changed to dense, writhing mist.

Up and up. . . . The clouds seemed unending.

"Sure is plenty of upset in the atmosphere to make clouds this dense," Elsa said briefly, getting up from her chair and moving to the recording machinery.

"Umph," Terry acknowledged, his entire concentration devoted to the task of controlling the vessel.

The globe left the clouds at last, plunged up steadily through the troposphere into the stratosphere. Here at last the sun came into view, searingly brilliant in a purple sky, its prominences and corona plainly visible.

Terry slowed the vessel climbing, began to move forward with gathering speed in the rarefied heights. His floor reflectors gave a view of the earth below shrouded from end to end in whirling gray clouds. Somberly he studied them.

"Guess I never saw sky like that before," he sighed; then swinging round, "Anything queer registering in the instruments?"

Elsa shrugged her slim shoulders. She was standing before the main window in the glare of the sunshine, fingering her apparatus and peering at their various recording meters. The ring on her right hand shone with a gleaming blood red fire in the savage brilliance. Unconsciously Terry found his gaze drawn to it.

"Say, you'd better keep your head away from the window," he warned her suddenly. "The globe's walls are insulated to cosmic rays and the sun's radiation, but the windows aren't. If cosmic rays strike through the glass onto the nerve centers of your brain anything might happen. I once saw a guy go raving mad through that."

Elsa smiled faintly. "Guess my brain won't be affected much, anyhow. . . ." Nonetheless she straightened up and sought the protection of the wall. Only her hands, slender and white, were in line with the window.

"Cosmic rays one hundred per cent," she observed at length. "That's normal for this height. Sunspots down to minimum. Wind velocity zero. No other radiations. So I guess the weather troubles are not connected with anything up here. The earth itself must be responsible."

"You're probably right. We'll finish the course anyway and see if there's anything else. . . ."

Terry turned back to his indicator-map, guided the globe entirely by the automatic pointer connected by radio stations on the earth below. By its aid he knew exactly what part of the world he was over. . . . For two hours he drove steadily onwards, came over hidden Los Angeles at last, swung round and started to return home to New York. Below, the scudding mass of gray was unchanged.

Elsa relaxed from her instruments, sat in the padded chair before them and yawned.

"Most unexciting," she sighed. "I'd expected much more!"

Terry slipped the automatic pilot into position and came to her side, sat down. She looked at him in surprise as he raised her right hand gently and stared at the ring on her finger.

"Something wrong?" she questioned.

"Not a thing—But, ever since I first met you this ring of yours has fascinated me. Funnily enough, this is the first time I've really had time or opportunity to see it properly. The brilliant sunshine sets it off amazingly."

She regarded it critically, turned it slowly so that it flickered lambent, hidden fires.

"Yes, it is rather beautiful," she confessed. "Mother gave it to me just before she died six years ago. She had it from her own mother, and so on right

down the scale of ancestors. Lord knows when it first came into being. No jeweler so far has even been able to tell what the stone is. Looks like a mixture of ruby, diamond and opal . . ."

She gave it a little tug and pulled it off her finger, handed it over. Terry studied it curiously and with a shrug finally handed it back.

"Makes the engagement ring I gave you look mighty sick by comparison," he sighed. "In fact I— Anything the matter?" he asked sharply, as he saw the girl was rubbing her finger rather vigorously.

"Nothing at all. Finger feels a bit cramped, that's all. Maybe I tugged too hard getting the ring off. . . ." She forced it back over her knuckle. "Ah! That's better . . ." But she still scratched her finger lazily for quite a time afterwards, relapsed into thought as she did so. Quietness fell on the cabin save for the dull droning of engines.

"Terry," she said at length, slowly, "did you ever feel that the life you are living is just superfluous? That you're really intended for something else?"

He grinned a little. "Well, privately, I always wanted to be an engine driver —but since I finished as a pilot I suppose you might consider my flying superfluous. I missed my real calling—"

"No—no, I'm serious!" she insisted, her eyes earnest. "It's something so much deeper than that! I often feel that somehow I don't really belong to this . . ." She paused, shrugged her shoulders. "Oh, skip it! I'm going moody, or something."

She got to her feet, walked slowly round the little room as Terry returned to his controls. Presently she spoke again.

"Doesn't it strike you as rather stuffy in here?"

"Dunno; is it?" He glanced at the gauges: they registered normal. Puzzled, he turned just in time to see the girl sink slowly into her padded chair and pass a limp hand over her forehead. He could see it was glistening with a sudden dewy perspiration. Her face had gone curiously pale.

"Elsa! What's wrong?" He scrambled out of his chair, seized her arms tensely and stared into her drawn face.

"It's—it's nothing. . . ." Her voice was low, almost fearful. "Just—just that I feel a bit faint, that's all. . . ."

"Faint, eh? This won't do! You've got a touch of radiation sure as fate. I warned you about that window. . . . Just leave this to me."

He raised her in his powerful arms, kicked down the emergency bed and laid her gently upon it, bunched up the pillow under her dark head. Then he got to work with sal volatile and oxygen cylinder. The girl revived a little under the combined influence, began to show signs of rising from the near-faint that had seized her.

Terry smiled at her gently. "You'll be okay," he murmured; then turned back to his controls. He permitted none of the anxiety he felt to be registered on his face. Cosmic ray prostration, or even paralysis from unwise soaking in the sun's unmitigated radiation, could produce horrible effects as he had reason to know. But after all she had only had her head near the window for about two minutes. Surely not enough—?

He gave the globe full power, sent it hurtling at maximum capacity through the nearly airless heights, watched anxiously as the pointer changed position on the map. Ever and again he shot a glance at the girl as she lay watching him—was rewarded with a curiously tired smile that gave him an inward pang.

Her change from active, jesting en-

ergy to languid weariness in so short a time was something he could not properly understand. His relief was unbounded as the pointer hovered at last over the New York headquarters. Swiftly he shifted the controls and began to dive through the gray murk. . . .

In fifteen minutes he had dropped through the whirling clouds into the shattering fury of the storm once more. The globe reeled crazily under the onslaught, was mastered once more by flawless controls, dropped swiftly to the tarmac outside the hangars. Here and there other machines had already landed.

"How now?" Terry leapt to the girl as she lay still.

A trace of her old smile curved her lips. "I—I don't quite know," she whispered. "Funny thing is. . . . I can't feel anything!"

"What!" Terry's effort to disguise alarm was futile. He seized her hand tightly. "Can't you even feel this?"

Her dark head shook. Her gray eyes seemed unnaturally large in her pale face.

"No—not a thing. . . . Oh, Terry, I'm getting scared. . . ."

He caught her behind the shoulders, held her close to him for a moment.

"No need to get scared, sweetheart," he breathed gently. "Just a touch of radiation gotten into you; that's all. I'll have you fixed in no time. . . ."

He laid her down again, swung round to the radio and snapped it on.

"Attention, ambulance quarters!" he barked. "Send ambulance immediately to Globe 47H outside Hangar 92. Emergency case — Miss Dallaway. Hurry!"

He returned to the girl's side, breathed gentle reassurances to her as she lay limply on the bed, then he got to his feet at the approaching scream of a siren. Swiftly he unclamped the airlock, stood aside as two heavily oil-skinned ambulance men came in with a stretcher. Behind them trailed Dr. Arthur Fletcher, the efficient chief physician and surgeon to the Corporation.

"Trouble, eh?" he asked laconically, snatching out a watch and seizing the girl's wrist at the same time. He said nothing when he had finished, merely motioned his men to take the girl out, watched with impassive eyes as she was lifted gently onto the stretcher and taken out under transparent mackintosh.

Terry followed as far as the ambulance, leaned inside it with his anxious face a few inches from the girl's.

"See you later, honey," he smiled. "I've work to finish. Keep your chin up . . ."

"I'll try . . ." Her voice was so low he could hardly hear it. Heedless of the driving rain he watched the doors close, then turned as Fletcher came hurrying past to climb up beside the driver.

Terry caught his arm. "Doc, what is it? Prostration?"

"Guess so . . ." Fletcher shrugged narrow shoulders. "Slow pulse, feeble respiration, partial paralysis. All the symptoms. She'll be all right in a week or two . . ." He paused and narrowed his piercing eyes. "You had no damn right to permit her to go into the stratosphere anyway! She may know globes backwards but she doesn't know the tricks to keep out of danger. Well, see you later. She'll be in the private ward; I'll take care of her personally."

"Yeah—yeah; thanks. . . ."

Terry moodily watched the ambulance back round then go moving off through the rain and wind to the hospital wing of the vast building. At last he turned and strode away toward his own office quarters.

For the remainder of the day Terry

was kept fully occupied. Once he had despatched his reports to the Scientific Analysis Department he was kept busy giving orders for the answering of distress calls endlessly pouring in.

Planes were being lost, vast portions of the country being inundated with flood waters, humanity was being trapped in areas where only storm planes and stratosphere globes could reach them. Hour after hour the tale of rising woe flowed in to him from various sources—nor did the intoned weather reports, given hourly during the existent climatic crisis, give much hope—

"Ceiling zero; wind 86 m.p.h., increasing. Continuous rain all areas. Advise caution to aircraft. Treacherous triple wind currents near all mountain ranges. Visibility 3 to 5 yards."

Several times Terry made fast trips himself to rescue stranded people and bring them to the comparative safety of New York.

By six o'clock, what should have been a normal spring evening, was a chaotic darkness of rain - rain and cyclonic wind that snatched away his breath and pounded him unmercifully as he at last found a spare moment to visit the hospital wing.

Immediately he arrived in the hall the starch bosomed matron telephoned Fletcher. In a moment or two he appeared down the main passage, grave faced and tight lipped.

"Glad you came, Terry," he said quietly. "I was going to ring you. . . . Miss Dallaway is much worse. No use in trying to disguise it."

"Worse?" Terry repeated bleakly. "But -but Doc, what *is* the matter with her?" He kept pace with the active surgeon along the white enameled corridor. "She was taken ill so suddenly . . . so strangely . . ."

Fletcher paused suddenly. "Frankly, Terry, I don't know what's wrong. It isn't cosmic wave prostration at all. It's something that's utterly beyond me; and beyond our instruments too . . ." He bit his underlip, said, slowly, "She's dying, boy. . . . I've got to tell you that. Her heart beats and respiration are getting feebler all the time—"

"She can't be dying!" Terry exploded frantically. "In God's name, Fletcher, you can't stand there and calmly tell me that! A young girl like her, full of life and vigor, just dying for no reason— You've got to do something! *Do something!*"

"I'm doing all I can." The specialist tried to look calm. "You know I am—"

"Where is she?" Terry glared hungrily round and Fletcher silently opened the door of a private room. Slowly Terry went forward to the silent figure in the bed, glanced in fearful horror at the significant screen and oxygen cylinder standing by the bedside.

In the moment that he stood gazing down on the girl he knew Fletcher was right. Elsa was waxen looking, motionless, her long lashes lying on her ashy cheeks with scarcely a quiver.

"Elsa -dearest. . . ." Terry took her white, cool hand, looked down briefly as his fingers encountered that blazing ring.

"Elsa, it's me—Terry. . . ."

Very slowly her eyes opened. Their gray depths seemed misted, clouded by the unknown. Slowly her lips moved.

"Floating, over stormy waters," she whispered softly. "Terrible landslides —volcanic eruptions. . . . And the wind ! Merciful Heaven, the wind . . ." She shifted uneasily, her eyes staring into vacancy.

"Elsa!" Terry implored brokenly. "Please speak to me!"

He glanced up haggardly as Fletcher shook his head quietly.

"Delirium," he murmured. "Been like this for two hours now. She doesn't know you; doesn't even know herself. Keeps on talking about sand and floods and wind. . . ."

". . . A city, so beautiful . . ." she whispered. "So beautiful, and yet— It crumbles. Down it goes. . . ." She stopped speaking, made a sudden writhing movement and clutched her throat. Instantly Fletcher was by her side, holding the oxygen cone over her mouth. She gasped noisily, struggled with a fierceness that made Terry wince to behold it.

He caught her hand, was suddenly aware that she had ceased making a noise, that the hand was deathly still. Dumbly he stared down on her. The cone had been removed now. Her lips were slightly parted, her eyes closed.

It seemed to Terry in that moment that the whole world turned inside out. Blinding tears obscured his vision. The sheet rising over the girl's face, the scream of the wind, the drumming of rain on the windows—

"Dead!" he screamed suddenly, pounding the bed rail. "Oh, God, no—! No, Fletcher! No, she can't be dead . . . *mustn't* be!"

The specialist's face seemed to dance in mist. His powerful hand closed on Terry's shoulder.

"She *is* dead, Terry," he said gently. "Please, I beg of you, try and control yourself— These things have to be faced."

"Without reason? Without cause? Don't hand me that!"

Things went blank for Terry thereafter. He did not faint, he did not scream. Subconsciously he had hold of himself again, but grief had deadened him to all external happenings. He had a hazy recollection that he went out of the hospital and walked and walked until he was soaked to the skin through his leather clothes. . . .

He walked and walked interminably, and the hurricane seemed to bear in its moaning breath the spirit of the girl who had died but a few short hours before.

CHAPTER III

Mystery in the Sahara

TERRY could not piece anything together for days afterwards. He remembered that it seemed to rain eternally, that clouds constantly scudded over the sky. All thought of work was dashed from his mind. . . . His chief recollections were bitter ones were those of following a great funeral cortege behind the mourners from the Corporation, of seeing the coffin carried amidst blinding rain into the Dallaway mausoleum on the hilltop ground which marked the boundary of the immense Dallaway estate. The stone sarcophagi of the girl's ancestors; her own tomb— It was more than he could stand.

Died from heart failure, Fletcher certified. Heart failure? In a girl so strong and active? Terry's mind revolted at that . . .

The day after her burial in the mausoleum the rain ceased. Drenched landscapes and flooded cities lay under scudding clouds through which a weak sun was trying to shine. Terry began to rise out of the miasma into which he had been plunged. Little by little he took a hold on himself again, faced once more the battle of life. But with Elsa gone nothing really mattered.

The proving of her will, rushed through at express speed because of the countless things contingent on it, revealed that Terry was the new owner of the Corporation, a thought which pleased him, though he extracted no

happiness from it. All he could do was try and guide its destinies in the way the girl would have wished.

As days drifted by and Terry took up his new post in the girl's former office as chief of staff, there came fresh news of disaster—of terrific volcanic eruptions by Vesuvius and Krakatoa, together with tremendous earthquakes in other zones, followed by another unceasing downpour of rain in nearly every part of the world. As he heard the news Terry could not help but remember Elsa's dying words—

"Terrible landslides—volcanic eruption . . ."

A vision of the future perhaps as she was near death? He shook his head bitterly; went back over her strange words in the stratosphere globe, her feeling of superficiality. Was there any conceivable link between these happenings and—?

"Hallo there, Terry!"

He looked up with a start, his chain of thought broken. It was Boyd Conway, his burly successor as chief pilot, who clumped into the office. With a sigh of relief he pulled off his helmet and released a wiry mass of ginger hair.

"Things pretty bad," he commented, perching on the desk and looking at Terry with serious brown eyes. "We've just had reports through from the Analysis Department on our findings a few weeks back. Seems the chances of sunspots or anything like that causing the present upheavals is most improbable. Whatever it is it's in the earth itself."

Terry nodded idly. "So I figured. What about Munro? What's his angle?"

Conway grinned at the mention of the Corporation's master scientist.

"Oh, he's having the time of his life—and he's doped out a pretty reasonable theory too. He says that every four thousand years—or probably less—the Earth undergoes immense inner changes in its structure—pressures change, stresses alter. . . . You know, the idea worked out by Soddy several years ago. Well, most of the pressure being sealed inside the Earth, it has to have an outlet sometime. During the four thousand year period certain parts of the pressure dribble off through volcanoes and so forth, but there comes a time finally when this is not enough and the pressure inside gets really tough. Then things happen.*

"But that wouldn't cause all this rain," Terry objected.

"No, but it causes the landslides and earthquakes. The rain is the direct outcome of enormous quantities of hot vapor from volcanic blasts striking the cooler levels of the upper atmosphere and thereby producing condensation."

Terry nodded moodily. "I get it. And if it goes on much longer where are we all going to be?"

"Drowned, I guess. . . ." Conway smiled twistedly at the thought; then he glanced up expectantly as the radio speaker gave its warning signal.

"Attention, Stratosphere Corporation! Despatch one hundred globes immediately to western Africa and remove all possible people to nearest zone of safety. Severe earthquake has caused the Mediterranean Sea to overflow Libya and it is now sweeping over the Southern Sahara to Nigeria. Settlers and new colonists are in great danger. Ordinary planes unable to cross storm areas raging in the Atlantic. Depart immediately. Message ends."

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* Munro's theory is undoubtedly correct. Geological data shows this has happened before; the Earth went through such a period about the time of the last Deluge. Whole continents went down and others went up in the struggle by the Earth to release its inner forces. A balance was reached, at the expense of huge geological changes.—Ed.

Conway sighed and stood erect, pulled on his helmet again.

"More trouble! I'll be seeing you, Terry."

"O. K. Keep in touch with me over the radio."

The door closed behind Conway and Terry turned to stare again at the great windows as the rain washed inexorably against them.

IN THE two days of rain which followed, it became more and more evident that disaster was creeping over the world—disaster so wholesale that scientists found themselves hard put to it to explain the reason.

The report of Whitaker Munro, chief scientist, was generally accepted as the correct one. Inner earthly pressures, pent up through ages except in unsatisfactory escapes through volcanoes and geysers, could no longer be denied. Vastly superheated gas in the earth's core was expanding relentlessly, and in consequence something had got to go. The shift in the earth's rind was, by comparison with the main pressure, almost infinitesimal—but it was quite sufficient to cause unparalleled havoc. The merest rise or drop in supposedly solid land, when it takes place in an instant, can shatter man's creations entirely.

Hour after hour, day and night, reports screamed through the tortured ether, filled earth's peoples with horror. Already South America's greatest cities lay in ruins; thousands of people were fleeing before the greatest floods in history as Atlantic strove to meet Pacific across the quaking, crumbling country.

The same upheaval sent titanic tidal waves crashing inward on all the western coasts of the States, produced an inevitable flood which roared inland as far as Nevada and Idaho. The Bering Sea was advancing inexorably into Siberia; Greenland was subsiding hour by hour. Far out in the middle of the Pacific a new and tremendous tableland was forming. All earth's geological formation was altering, sweeping untold thousands to doom, smashing away the creations over which mankind had labored for generations.

So far New York was untouched. Most of the eastern American seaboard had escaped, beyond the incessant rain which flooded the streets and made it next to impossible for the sewers to carry away the weight of water. Inevitably they would finally block themselves up; then indeed serious trouble would begin.

Terry, in the Corporation building, was not in such a bad position. His quarters were in the building itself; everything he needed was supplied by the vast place. And further, the great walls around the building, together with the solid gates, were sufficient to keep any flood waters at bay for many days if necessary.

Most of the time he was kept constantly occupied in arranging for rescue work. In the few quiet intervals he wondered how Conway was faring on the African job, a wonder which deepened to genuine alarm by the third day and there was still no news. Then around 2:00 o'clock Conway's clipped voice came over the short wave radio.

"Terry?"

"Speaking," Terry answered, fingering the dials. "What's the matter? Where've you been all this time? Moving the people?"

"Got rid of them a long time ago; the rest of the squadron will be home any time now. I got separated from them in the storm and went over the Northern Sahara— Right now I'm in the middle of the desert and it's raining like hell. In fact I shouldn't be at all surprised if the whole desert goes

down one of these days and forms the bed of an ocean."

Terry frowned at the instruments. "Well, what the devil are you taking such a risk for? Come on back!"

"Not yet. Give me time to finish, can't you? Truth is, I've found something queer —it's been revealed by the earthquakes and unexpected flooding around these parts. I've found a metal dome in the sand, some sort of metal that's tougher than anything I ever struck. I guess only a flame gun would go through it. This dome's about forty feet across and the base goes down into the sand. Must have been buried for centuries. Seems to me it ought to interest Munro, and you too. How about it? Can you come and bring equipment with you?"

"Well, I don't know what you're rambling about; but I'll come," Terry answered. "I'll drive a globe over myself. I'm about the only one to handle it in this storm. Munro's no pilot."

"O. K. Radio me when you're near Africa; I'll direct you."

Terry switched off and puzzled to himself for a moment. Dome in the Sahara? He shrugged, switched over to the science department and contacted Munro. Ten minutes later he arrived, accompanied by Dawlish, his assistant, carrying various small but efficient scientific instruments.

The six foot four, bald headed scientist was in ecstasies. He rubbed his long clawlike hands together eagerly.

"Dome in the desert, eh?" he breathed gleefully, his pale gray eyes losing something of their frigidity. "Is that something!"

"Probably a mirage," growled Dawlish, his round, fleshy face anything but pleased. "The idea smells if you ask me."

Terry grinned faintly. "So far as I know, Munro, Conway really thinks he's found something. We'd better go and look."

"Most decidedly!" Munro struggled into oilskins, flattened down a sou'wester over his dome. He looked oddly like a lamppost wrapped in cellophane as he swung to the door.

"Well?" he demanded, toothbrush black eyebrows shooting up. "What are we waiting for? Come along. . . ."

Terry waited only long enough to hand over his work to the capable Davies, then followed the scientist and Dawlish onto the rain swept expanse of tarmac outside.

The vast winds and vortices raging in the tortured atmosphere more than once nearly defeated Terry's efforts. The stratosphere globe rolled and pitched wildly under the impacts, gained and lost altitude constantly—but very slowly, due to superb airmanship, it finally began to climb gradually over the storm areas, higher and higher into the angry gray that was the afternoon sky. Up and up to the calmer heights, until at last the wind dropped and Terry felt safe to drive forward.

He gave the machine maximum power, hurtled through the nearly airless spaces to the east, right out across the Atlantic, hidden under its boiling scum of storm clouds, guiding the course entirely by the map's directional pointer. Half way across the ocean a squadron of globes hove out of the distance—the rescue fliers returning from the African excursion. Briefly they flashed a signal of greeting, then continued on their way.

One hour, two hours, three hours—and the three thousand mile trip over the Atlantic began to near its end. Terry drove down into the murk, staring anxiously at the pointer, then through the rain smeared windows. The wind here was not so strong, nor the deluge as severe. Nonetheless the

old North African aspect of blazing sunshine had gone—the whole landscape lay under scudding storm clouds as the globe dropped below them and swept at decreased speed over the vast wastes of the Northern Sahara.

Terry snapped on the radio. In a few moments he was speaking to Conway and following his directions. In half an hour his lone stratosphere globe loomed up in the distance, seemingly unusually small by comparison with the massive dome standing in the background against the stormy sky.

"What the Sam Hill is it?" breathed Dawlish in amazement, squinting between the raindrops on the window. "Looks like the dome of a buried city, or something."

The lofty Munro shook his head. "Not very likely. No city has been unearthed in the Sahara in all its existence."

"Soon find out anyhow," Terry remarked, bringing the vessel to a standstill.

He scrambled into his oilskins, opened the lock and walked across to where Conway was standing by his own globe. Munro followed up in the wet, sloppy sand, his pale eyes narrowed with interest under his dripping hat brim, Dawlish, carrying the well covered equipment, regarded the towering metal dome in some disgust.

"Meteor, I'd say," he growled. "Been buried under the sand all this time."

"Did you ever see a meteor with rivets in it?" asked Conway significantly, then seeing the looks of amazement he went on, "I investigated further after radioing you. Just under the sand, at the base of the dome, is a complete line of rivets. This top dome is just the end of a huge metal ship of some sort. Maybe even—even a space ship. . . ." He wound up as though he wasn't at all sure of himself.

"Certainly nobody could ever have transported a thing like this into the Sahara," Munro commented, moving toward it. "It must have dropped from the skies, if anywhere."

He studied the metal of the thing closely for a time, finally shrugged his narrow shoulders. "No idea what it is—neither steel nor iron."

"What'll you have, chief?" Dawlish asked briefly. "Flame gun?"

Munro nodded abstractedly, rubbed his pointed chin.

"If the total length of the ship—granting this is part of one—can be judged from this, it must go a tremendous distance under the sand. . . . O. K., Dawlish, get busy."

Dawlish uncovered the gleaming tube of the flame gun and pressed the contact switch. Instantly the internal motor sent a withering line of fire against the metal, set it glowing to white heat in a moment. The men watched through half closed eyes, Dawlish himself staring through the gun's blue shield.

Far swifter than the old fashioned oxyacetylene welder, it carved a large circle out of the metal within twenty minutes, destroying the atoms thereof and converting them into energy. Finally a powerful kick sent the piece of metal tumbling inwards, wherein it clanged noisily and seemed to fall for a tremendous distance.

The men glanced at each other uneasily for a moment.

"Hollow all right," Munro commented. "Hope we didn't break anything."

Turning suddenly he leaned through the gap and flashed his torch around. He withdrew with a puzzled face.

"Looks like some sort of a shaft," he said. "Or the hollow inside of a long cylinder. Take care in coming through the opening, else you'll drop Heaven knows how far. There's a small

ledge just below the gap we've made, part of the joint in the metal where the rivets are fitted. Wide enough to stand on, with care. Follow me."

He went inside the opening and vanished presently from sight. Terry followed him up, found he was indeed standing on a narrow ledge, some interior binding ring of the perpendicular ship.

Cautiously he tugged out his own torch and flashed the beam below. At perhaps two hundred feet depth, where the light hardly reached, it was reflected back to him with a faint glitter.

"Glass?" he asked Munro—but the lanky scientist had found a metal ladder in the wall and was already clambering down it, his torch waving erratically. Half way down the abyss he stopped and shouted, his voice echoing weirdly.

"Say, there's a manhole lock right here. Must be about a hundred feet below desert level. . . ." Silence for a moment, then, "It must be locked on the outside; no sign of a clamp or screw here—only a sort of automatic device."

He continued the downward climb again, Terry now following suit. Immediately above him, treading warily, were Dawlish and Conway.

Terry stopped at last as he alighted on a curved wall of transparency that was clearly glass. For a long time he and the others flashed their torches around, studying the massive gyroscopical bearings in which the entire internal glass globe was supported, so designed that it swung upright no matter how the outer case twisted and turned.

"Look down there . . ." murmured Munro, and his beam passed through the glass under his feet to train on a neat and orderly control room, a mass of machinery grouped at one end and connected to a switchboard, before which stood two metal chairs.

"It's a space ship all right," he went on pensively. "I wonder if it is possible for—" He stopped abruptly as Terry's torch beam flashed idly down. Suddenly he gasped out, "Say, what's that? A little more to the left—*There!*"

Silent, utterly dumbfounded, the quartet stared down. To the left of their position, lying on the floor of the globe, was a motionless figure—the figure of a girl, bare arms outflung, her slender form draped in the briefest of garments, her feet encased in dainty sandals. Black hair lay draped around her shapely head.

"A woman!" Munro looked up in blank amazement — then recovering himself he hit the glass forcibly below him with his heavy boot. It made not the least impression. Irritated he swung to Dawlish.

"Flame gun, man — quick! The glass is as tough as the metal. Come on."

"O. K.," Dawlish grunted. "But I don't see a few minutes longer will make much difference to the dame. She must have been here since the Sahara was born, anyway." He angled the gun and released the switch.

The glass was by no means easy to break even under the blasting power of the flame gun, but it did finally fuse and begin to splinter, melted queerly and dropped huge globules of boiling substance below. Air sighed into the hole.

During the operation Terry glanced further along the dome—beheld the piece of metal they had smashed out of the ship's wall. The glass had not even cracked under the impact.

"Right!" breathed Munro suddenly, and slid through the gap in the glass, dropped the twelve feet to the floor below—likewise glass. One by one the

others followed him, stood at some little distance in the stuffy, circular chamber, gazing at the motionless girl.

"What do we do now?" asked Dawlish uneasily. "I'm all for getting out of here. It's giving me the jitters."

Nobody spoke. Terry went slowly forward, torch firmly clamped in his hand— But long before he reached the sprawling girl he stopped in frozen wonderment, the circle of the beam playing on her outflung right hand. On the second finger was a ring, its stone blazing with sullen fires! He'd know that ring anywhere. Elsa Dallaway had been placed in the mausoleum with it on her hand . . . !

Mistaking Terry's motionlessness for uncertainty, Munro strode forward, gently caught the girl under the shoulders and turned her over so that her face fell in the area of light. Immediately he dropped her, even his scientific calmness shattered.

"My God!" he whispered hoarsely. "My God. . . ."

"It's—it's Elsa!" Terry screamed suddenly, twisting round from staring at that dead white face and closed eyes. "Oh, Heaven, it's Elsa! I can't stand this place, Munro; I'm getting—"

"Take it easy, Terry!" Conway came up grimly from the shadows, seized Terry's arm in a grip of iron. "Don't go off half cocked!" he snapped. "This can't be Elsa; all reason's against it. She's in the mausoleum. Relax, I tell you!"

Quivering with emotion, Terry made a terrific effort to master himself. He turned back dumbly to the still, beautiful figure on the floor, let his torch rays play on the face. The girl resembled Elsa to the last detail, looking just as she had in her tomb. The only difference lay in the clothing. Gingerly he touched the slender bare arm—then he recoiled with a sudden gulp of horror as the girl shivered momentarily, trembled, then collapsed into a mass of dust which swirled in the wet wind blowing down through the two holes from the exterior. . . .

A tinkling noise, and the ring fell from where the hand had been to lie in blazing solemnity.

Stunned, the four men stared fixedly at the spot from which the girl had utterly disappeared.

CHAPTER IV

The Meaning of the Jewel

AT last Dawlish spoke.

"Chief, we're seeing things!" he cried dismally. "Please let's get out of here!"

"Four perfectly sane men can't see things," Munro retorted, his pale eyes contracted in thought. "Use your brains, man! This space machine has been sealed under the desert sands for Lord knows how long. No air has been able to get inside this double shell. That girl probably died in the first instance from suffocation, after which she just lay where she'd fallen for thousands of years. She couldn't decay visibly because of lack of air—but the instant air surged in normalcy reasserted itself. Long extinction passed suddenly to its normal state and she just collapsed to dust, her clothes going with her. Other things will start to deteriorate rapidly as well, but of course machinery is tougher than flesh and blood and fabric."

He bent down and picked up the ring, turned it over musingly under the torch beam.

"At least that's Elsa's ring!" Terry whispered, staring at it. "I'd know it anywhere."

Munro laughed shortly. "Then your powers of observance are mighty poor.

I had occasion many times to see Miss Dallaway's ring at close quarters before she died—and it differed in one degree from this one. The claw on this stone has six prongs; hers had only four, like a massive solitaire. Identical stone, certainly, and just as unclassifiable as hers. Another thing, her ring was a trifle too large; this one is a tight fit—or rather was."

"Then — then the girl?" Conway asked in bewilderment. "I'd swear anywhere that it was Elsa Dallaway."

"An uncanny likeness, I admit. . . ." Munro frowned. "For a moment I was completely deceived myself— But consider!" he went on impressively. "Forgive the gruesome details; they're necessary. Miss Dallaway, by this time, will be in a state of visible decomposition in the mausoleum. Even if by some mad fluke we admitted that she could have been transported here, nothing so ordinary as fresh air could have accellerated her decomposition so much as to make her vanish into mere dust. Besides, I repeat, the clothes were not the same. The girl who vanished was not wearing a shroud— No, no, the girl was not Miss Dallaway, but practically her twin, wearing a similar ring. Mystery — profound mystery, and somewhere it has a solution. What's more, we're going to find it."

He tugged off his oilskins actively, rubbed his hands.

"Dawlish, throw down a couple of light extensions from the globes on the surface, then we'll be able to see what we're doing. We're going to solve the mystery of this ship if we stop here for eternity. We've food enough in tabloids to last for a month, and there's no time like the present. Let's get started!"

Munro went to work with the air of a master mind, turned all his ruthlessly analytical faculties to bear upon the mystery of the machine. Terry was filled with complete bewilderment, not unmixed with horror. This sudden and incredible happening had only served to stir up the unhappy memories he had been trying to outgrow.

Dawlish and Conway, having no emotions to overcome, went about their part of the business with relentless thoroughness. They made their headquarters inside the vessel, had meals there, slept there, spent all the time piecing the problem together, entirely oblivious to whatever grim happenings were taking place in the world outside. Their only contact with external events was the radio and the incessant howling of the wind down the shaft they had made. Corporation headquarters had been advised that they were busy on an important investigation, and there the matter finished.

One thing soon became evident. The glass globe control room was beautifully poised in the center of the ship itself, swung so perfectly even yet that it tilted gently when the men gathered in a group at one end of the place. The airlock of the glass globe was so perfectly let into the glass, so much a part of it in its sealed efficiency, that it took a surprising time to find it.

Even then it could not be opened—nor would ordinary blows splinter the glass. Only the flame gun did that, and once underneath the globe in the lower part of the perpendicular ship the four made the surprising discovery that the glass door had been locked on the outside—just as had the airlock on the outer shell. Somebody had gone out of the ship, bolting the doors on the way, and had never returned. The girl, shut inside, had died horribly. The discovery of empty oxygen tanks inside the globe were proof in themselves of the effort the girl had made to preserve her life, until at last the

supply had run out.

In the very nose—the bottom—of the upended ship was a strange contrivance of electrical machines, all cupped in the very core of the nose and attached to a cable leading back through fused terminals in the globe to the internal switchboard. Munro's cold eyes followed the cable steadily, became thoughtful.

"This machinery can't surely be for motive power?" he muttered. "If it were, they'd surely have put it on the floor of the ship instead of in the nose? Wonder why the devil they tilted it on end like this—"

"Say, do you hear something, chief?" Dawlish broke in tensely, and the four of them stood in absolute silence in the reflected light from the illumined glass globe above.

Presently they detected the noise to which Dawlish had referred—a deep, far distant roaring noise seeming an incredible distance down in the earth itself. There was something frightening about it –a suggestion of colossal power, or wind, hemmed in by unknown forces and striving for an outlet. It sounded oddly like a gale blowing through a subway tunnel.

"I don't like it," Conway muttered with an uneasy glance. "It sounds just as though something is going to blow up!"

"In the present state of the earth's interior anything may be causing that sound," Munro answered. "Internal upheavals beyond doubt, the sound being conducted through the ground. It does sound weird, I admit.

"But what puzzles me is this confounded machinery. The more I look at it the less it resembles motive power. Looks for all the world like apparatus for relaying radio waves, though I don't see how the devil that applies."

He studied it again, shrugged his narrow shoulders, then returned to the glass control room and became absorbed in thought before the switchboard. For a long time he studied an object like a camera, its entire squat bulk tapering to an unlensed nozzle. With painstaking care he measured its distance to the two chairs before the control board, sat in the chairs themselves and studied the straps on the arms and back, straps that were already showing signs of rotting now that air had gotten in.

When he had completed his notes on the switchboard he set about the projector again, examined the complex system of clockwork-like devices inside it. Apparently satisfied he then took the girl's ring and subjected it to an exhaustive series of tests with the scientific apparatus he had on hand from the stratosphere globe at the surface.

What line his reasoning took none of the others could guess. They only noticed that his work needed the flame gun several times; that at one period he seemed lost in a daze, almost as though he were intoxicated—then, recovering, he went to work again, tight lipped, non-informative, driving to the root of the puzzle with all the cold incisive reasoning of a detective solving a murder.

For two days he continued his prowling, thinking, and examining, only emerging from his pensiveness when Terry, by the sheerest accident, happened to discover a hitherto unnoticed inlet cupboard, which formerly had been mistaken for a small pillar, by the switchboard. Surprised, he stared at the thin metal rolls that tumbled out.

Instantly Munro pounced on them, took them eagerly to the experimental table and stretched them out, stared down on them with the others gazing eagerly round him.

"Hieroglyphics—not unlike Ancient

Egyptian," breathed Conway. "Looks as though they've been done with a stylus, or something. Metal instead of parchment."

Munro's bald head was nodding slowly. "Hieroglyphics that may explain the whole knotty problem," he muttered. "I guess the only person likely to solve them is Wade, back at the Corporation. Dead languages and codes are his only delight in life—Hallo, what's this?"

He had turned to the next metal sheet and frowned over the diagram thereon. It represented a perfectly drawn, rather pointed ellipse with a circle in the center, poised perpendicularly over something that resembled a cylinder, at the base of which was another, smaller ellipse around which were grouped objects that might be machinery. At the base of the cylinder were wavy lines.

"Say, it's this very space ship!" Terry exclaimed suddenly. "Look, this round thing in the center of the perpendicular ellipse is this globe we're in right now. The ellipse is the ship, and the cylinder it fits in is tapered all the way down so that the ship is wedged at the top. Yes, I'm stumped, 'specially the wavy lines."

"Given time I can probably work it out," Munro said briefly. "You, Conway, had better take this hieroglyphic message back to headquarters and get Wade to work on it right away. Radio to us the minute you know anything. Now get going."

"Right!" Conway took the metal sheets and departed swiftly, leaving Terry and Dawlish watching intently as Munro turned to the next metal sheet—the last one. It had engraven upon it the unmistakable formation of a city. Munro stroked his chin; Terry stared at it fixedly, a memory of words drifting like a forlorn echo across his mind.

"A city so beautiful. It crumbles . . . down it goes!"

A city? Elsa Dallaway? The woman who had crumbled to dust? Two rings. . . . He shook his head wearily, wandered off across the room as Munro settled down to another long spell of concentration.

Munro brooded throughout the remainder of that day, was still tireless when Terry and Dawlish made up their makeshift beds and gratefully lay down. Only one solitary globe illumined Munro as he sat in thought, his bald dome shining like a great egg, his eyes chilly marbles as he stared into space.

Terry closed his eyes, listened to the eternal whining of the wind down the great shaft and, below it, subdued yet insistent, the muffled, thundering mystery that lay beneath the space ship's nose. He began to doze, began to dream—

Then he was suddenly and violently awakened. Wincing in the light of the solitary globe he stared up into Munro's face. For once the scientist was actually eager, shaken out of his dispassionate calm. Dawlish still slept heavily, emitting the snores of one at peace with the flesh.

Munro squatted down, tugged out a foul pipe and lit it. Solemnly he said, "Terry, I think I have it—at least part of it."

"You have!" Terry sat up wakefully, silently forgave the violence of his departure from slumber.

"Right now," Munro said slowly, "we're sitting over a shaft some five miles deep, up which are trying to escape Earth's inner forces in all their fury. Only they can't because a gigantic valve of metal—probably the same incredibly tough metal of which this ship is made—holds them back. Only an atom smasher can fuse this metal, not mere pressure alone, no matter how strong."

Terry stared blankly. "You sit there so calmly and tell me that!" he gasped. "What the hell are we doing risking it? And anyhow, how do you know all this? Who'd be nuts enough to sink a five mile shaft anyway, even if they could?"

"When you've disentangled your anything but clear remarks I'll continue. . . ." Munro had the cold iciness now that always came to him when he was dead sure of himself. "The measurements on the diagram we found show, that by comparison with the ship, the tapering 'cylinder' below its nose—which is actually intended to represent a shaft—is all of five miles depth. The wavy lines are earth strata. It's simple enough to see that the shaft has direct access to the inner furies boiling up from Earth's very core through innumerable seams and natural tunnels. Gases, lava, inconceivable pressures—some of them escaping, but a vast majority held back by a gigantic valve. That is this—" and he stabbed the metal diagram with his pipe to show the small ellipse in the bottom of the "cylinder."

"It is pretty evident that whoever built the shaft knew that it would directly connect with a great natural inner fault extending maybe thousands of miles into the earth—and thereby the main outlet for inner pressures. How this fact was discovered we don't yet know. Now, the machinery sunk in the nose of the ship is of radio design; that we know already. It's operated from the switchboard inside the globe here. In the small power plant is a bar of copper. It's pretty certain the genius who built this ship had solved the secret of atomic energy's inexhaustible power. Using this energy, the switchboard transferred it to the radio machinery, waves were generated, and they in turn reacted on the giant valve at the bottom of the shaft. Under the influence the valve would turn aside into an inlet. See this drawing again. . . . There's distinct evidence of some kind of machinery round the valve. Anyway, that's the way I figure it."

"But," Terry pondered, "if that happened the ship would go up like a rocket before the blast from the shaft!"

"It would go out into space far beyoung the pull of Earth's gravity field," the scientist n o d d e d complacently. "Now do you see?"

Terry frowned. "So far as I can make out some master mind planned to use the earth's natural forces to fire this space ship into the void. He had no motive power of his own so created a vast cannon of natural power. But *why*, Munro? What good would it do to just get fired into space?"

Munro debated. "As yet we don't know the reason for this desire to leave earth," he murmured. "One or two facts are clear. The people responsible were definitely Earthlings and not, as I at first thought, inhabitants of another world sojourning here. Nobody from another world could be so like Earthlings as that woman we found. Again, there was once a city around here which finally became buried under sand. Lastly, the people were far ahead of us in scientific knowledge, but even so actual space travel was one thing they had still to solve. The point I stumbled over was the matter of strain on being fired from this shaft. They would hurtle outwards at such a terrific pace that living flesh and blood could not stand it. That's where the ring comes in."

Terry grazed wondering as Munro showed the disseceted ring in his palm.

"I tried everything I could think of to get some reaction out of this ring, but I got nothing until I tried it in the range of the flame gun. With the flame gun I smashed up a piece of metal, and since the gun works on the principle of forc-

ing electron and proton into contact in order to destroy atoms, it of course produces cosmic waves in the process—a small scale replica of the vast radiation floods going on eternally in outer space. The instant the cosmic waves radiating from the smashed metal reached the stone, a tiny needle actuated by a spring shot out of the ring circlet and just as quickly went back again. After that, I took the ring to pieces.

"Actually, Terry, the stone of the ring is a beautifully made prismatic device, gathering cosmic rays and concentrating them on a mechanism which releases a spring. The spring thrusts out the needle just once into the wearer's finger, then snaps back. Once I had the ring in pieces I saw that the needle was really coated with some fluidlike stuff—in truth an enormously powerful drug."

"What!" Terry gasped blankly. "How do you know that?"

"Remember a period a little while back when it looked as though I was drunk? That was after trying an infinitely small percentage of the needle's contents. Had I taken the whole lot I'd have been utterly paralyzed, I guess. From chemical analysis it is quite obvious the drug is a brilliant combination of chemicals for producing suspended animation — No, wait a minute! Let me finish. The drug lies in one-half of the ring—but in the other half is an antidote and a second spring. That second spring is released not by cosmic raves, but radio waves. The stone can deal with either."

"But—but why all this planning and arranging with a ring?" Terry demanded.

"Quite simple. Let us assume that this plan for firing the ship had succeeded. What would have happened? The occupant is sat in the chair by the switchboard there, presuming for a moment there is only one person present. The pressure is weighing him down as he hurtles through Earth's atmosphere —he can't lift a finger to help himself, can hardly even breathe. The straps are secure round his limbs—so, out into space!

"Instantly cosmic waves surge through the ship, react on the ring stone. Needle stabs, drug fills body and suspends all its faculties, destroys breathing and heart beats—makes it possible for that inanimate mass of flesh to move at frightful speed without any injury to organs. Then what?

"Gradually the ship's speed becomes constant. In that projector by the switchboard is clockwork radio machinery. Without doubt it would be set in action before the start of the journey, timed to release a switch when, by calculation, the ship would have reached a constant velocity and acceleration would have ceased. A radio wave from the nozzle-like end of the thing strikes dead on those chairs before the switchboard—strikes the ring on our figurative traveler. The antidote works and he revives, none the worse, sets about his plans for a landing and guiding the ship.

"That, too, could be done easily enough by recoiling radio beams, exerting sufficient pressure in striking a planet easily to swing the ship as desired and break the fall when the desired world is reached. The mightiest difficulty—pulling against gravity from Earth—has been overcome. Now do you understand?"

Terry was nodding slowly, a multitude of thoughts chasing through his brain.

"You've—you've definitely proved the antidote works with radio wave reaction?" he asked slowly.

"Beyond question—but as yet I don't know the wavelength."

"Then the whole thing was really a

gigantic effort to leave the earth by automatic means?"

"Exactly. And there were probably two people here—the girl and somebody else. At the last minute something went wrong and the journey was never made. The girl was left to die, and—"

Munro broke off in surprise as Terry gripped his arm tightly.

"Munro, do you begin to realize the truth?" he whispered, his eyes bright with anxiety. "Do you understand what you have found? *Elsa is not dead!*"

The scientist's cold eyes stared back levelly. "Take it easy, Terry! After all—"

"I mean it!" he cried hoarsely. "I remember now! When she came with me on that stratosphere trip she was testing cosmic waves. Her ringed hand couldn't fail to be in the path of them because it was right before the window. Cosmic waves won't go through a stratosphere globe's walls, but they will through the window. Her ring must have been like this one. She got the benefit of the drug—" He broke off, breathing hard. "She did not really die! She only went into suspended animation. . . . Oh, my God, we've got to do something quick! Give her antidote—anything! Smash her ring open and give it to her—"

"What the hell's going on here?" Dawlish stirred among his blankets and looked around blearily. "Let a guy get some sleep, can't you?"

"Never mind sleeping; come here and listen!" Munro snapped; then he turned back to Terry. "Guess you're right about Elsa, Terry. I didn't know the real circumstances about her actions in the stratosphere. Certainly she'd get the full blast of cosmic waves on that ring. We've got to think this out carefully. Can't rush at it. One slip up, and she's dead forever. Can't use the antidote from this ring; I used it all up making experiments."

"Then smash the ring she was buried with!" Terry implored. "Can't you see what it means—"

"Of course I can, but your idea's too impetuous. Smashing her ring may lose the antidote utterly. No; the only thing to do is to analyze that radio projector there and find the exact wavelengths it generates. Then we can either take that projector with us, or else know enough about it to duplicate it. With that idea we can turn the waves on Elsa's ring from the mausoleum itself and, we hope, revive her. Let me see now? In her tomb she has no air—Hmm, not that it matters. To all intents and purposes she is dead. Yes, only thing to do is to find the wavelength."

"What's all this about?" Dawlish demanded.

"Terry will tell you that." Munro scrambled to his feet, tireless as ever. Then he paused suddenly. "Say, we've gotten this far," he mused, "but how the devil did Elsa get hold of a second ring anyhow?"

He turned, shrugging, to the projector and Terry turned to explain matters to Dawlish. He explained very sketchily. One thought alone was drumming through his brain— Elsa Dallaway was alive! Locked in a tomb through some odd twist of time and circumstance which had still to be unraveled.

CHAPTER V

A Race Against Doom

TOWARDS dawn, as Munro still labored over the analysis of the radio projector, the normal portable short wave apparatus suddenly came into ac-

tion. Immediately, Dawlish crossed to it, clamped on the headphone and began to write steadily. He continued for twenty minutes, then broke the contact and turned.

"Conway, chief," he announced briefly. "Seems Wade can't solve the puzzle entirely, but he's managed part of it. It is mainly in very old Egyptian and Arabian language, intermingled. He's substituted modern terms for ancient numbers and distances."

Munro took the notes from him and read them aloud:

"'. . . our city is falling into ruins. Few of our people can survive. The three thousand year (?) cycle of surface change is here. . . . Hurricanes sweep by, driving the sand before them —the sand of an ocean bed, the waters of which have receded to smother a vast but fortunately deserted continent. . . . Sand. . . . Our city will perish beneath it. The people do not believe. . . . Thensla and I can escape perhaps— The second planet (Venus?) is a possible world. Yes, we can escape, take a chosen few with us. The few who still do believe. . . .'"

Munro turned the page avidly, went on to the next one.

"'. . . I believe I can accomplish a double purpose. The problem of leaving Earth can be overcome. X-rays (?) reveal fault leading to core of disturbances—five mile (?) division of earth and rock between core shaft and surface. . . . Shaft of five miles (?) could be sunk with valve of *drulux* (some kind of metal? Wade) at its base, operated by radio control. . . . Blast would fire ship into space and release Earth's inner pressure to such an extent that the upheavals would cease. Some of our race would perhaps survive. Three or four thousand (?) years will elapse before it comes again. Thensla, myself, and those who believe will travel to this second world; radio beams will land us safely. Our friends we shall place in suspended animation to commence with. We ourselves will use the rings. I cannot—'"

The message ended abruptly. In wonderment the three men stared at each other.

"So there definitely *was* a city here three or four thousand years ago," Munro breathed. "Buried under the Sahara sands, which were brought hither by hurricanes blowing over the sea bottom of a receded ocean. The people belonged to Earth, were an ancient civilization of tremendous knowledge. And why not? Time and again science has proven the ancients to be far cleverer than we. It is even possible that this race was the basic cause of all past mysteries and miracles. Science, of enormous power, was lost when upheaval swept over the world.

"Who wrote this record? Was he the father, the husband or the lover of the girl Thensla? We will call him the Recorder, for convenience. And why is Elsa so much like the vanished Thensla? Only Elsa herself can perhaps provide the solution."

"No question of it!" Terry exclaimed. "Even as she lay apparently dying in the hospital she spoke of things exactly matching up with the events described in this record."

Munro debated for a time, said thoughtfully, "Most amazing! May have something to do with Time itself." He shrugged. "However, that we'll know later. What we know now is that the Recorder hit on the sublime idea of saving the earth and blasting himself and those dearest to him into space at the same time. It didn't work for reasons still unknown. But *this* time. . . . Good Heavens, don't you see?"

"You mean that if we release the valve we blow this unwanted ship into

the void and expend all—or at least nearly all—of Earth's internal tumults at one go?" Terry asked quickly.

"Of course—even as a locomotive's excess steam escapes by the safety valve. In truth this shaft is the Earth's safety valve because it has direct path to the core. The Recorder's X-ray showed that. On the last occasion the valve was not moved through an unknown mistake and the havoc went on until the pressure escaped through volcanoes and constant earthquake. This time no such thing will happen because we'll release the pressure. At one terrific blast the entire mass of inner gas and steam will go off, hurl this ship into space in the process. What happens to it is, of course, immaterial."

"But we'll have to control it from inside here," Dawlish objected.

"Not necessarily. The Recorder wanted it that way, of course, but there's nothing to stop radio waves operating from a considerable distance, provided they're directed properly. We can, if necessary, shift that valve from as far away as New York. In fact, for safety, that's what we'd better do. The shock of the uprush will be felt the world over."

Munro wasted no further time on words. He turned back actively to the completion of his analysis.

Six more hours brought Munro to the end of his analysis of wires, coils, tubes and controls—an analysis that had filled a comfortably thick notebook. He made no immediate observations on his conclusions, simply fell asleep exhausted. When he awoke again it was late afternoon.

"Well, did you get everything?" was Terry's anxious demand.

"Yes, I got it." Munro rubbed his unshaven chin. "But we'll have to make the apparatus. That stuff there is beginning to fall to pieces. Thing to do is to head for New York right now."

Neither Terry nor Dawlish needed a second invitation. They had their equipment already packed and ready. Quickly they moved to the ladder outside the globe and climbed up to the gray hole giving egress to the surface. The moment they poked their heads up the cyclonic force of the wind thundered into their faces, filled with driving rain and stinging sand grains. Battling against it they gained their stratosphere globe and tumbled inside.

Instantly, Terry moved to the controls, slammed them home the moment Munro had closed the airlock. Tugging and pulling, the globe struggled into the upper reaches, battled through the midst of the clouds to the quieter regions, and onwards in a westerly direction.

The view was unchanged. Below swirled the eternal boiling scum of clouds. When, three hours later, they dropped once more they were met with a vision of rolling waters entirely inundating vast portions of America's eastern seaboard. The sea, driven with hurricane force and turmoiled by the upset of earthquake and tremors, had spilled over into New York itself, marooning the towering buildings, obliterating the storm-lashed harbors. Presumably the same conditions existed all along the coast.

"We've got to step on it!" Munro cried in anxiety. "It looks as though the whole continent is slowly going down. If only we have the time to release that safety valve we can still save a greater part of it. Get all you can out of her, Terry!"

Terry did not answer. He was already hurling the globe at maximum speed between the towers of Manhattan, staring below on streets that had become rivers, at edifices gleaming with

the lashing deluge, on numberless windows through which stared countless faces.

Twisting and turning, he made for the Corporation grounds, beheld them at last with a tumbling lake where the tarmac should have been, the walls standing up in lonely isolation.

"Guess we'll have to float," he snapped out. "Water's through the walls at last. Stand by for a bump."

He brought the ship down with a resounding smacking splash: it reeled wildly, finished on even keel by the weight of its floor engines. A boat started out from the marooned Corporation building, presently gained the vessel's side. It was Conway's rain smeared face that appeared in the opened airlock.

"Been watching for you coming," he explained. "Why didn't you radio—?"

"No time," interrupted Munro briefly. "How are things going?"

"Pretty bad. Practically all the western states have subsided under the Pacific, and—Well, I guess we're isolated here completely, with food fast running low." He stopped, smiled faintly. "Find anything worth while in Africa?"

"Probably the answer to everything," Munro responded. "Let's get across to the building; there's work to be done. How about the laboratories? Still above water?"

"Yeah—but I can't say for how long."

Munro climbed purposefully through the airlock, the others following up behind him.

For days afterwards Munro was a tornado of energy, working now with frantic desperation against time. Fortunately, the laboratories were on the upper floor and, as yet, safe from the flood. The huge self contained building still provided all the necessities of life, but there was no guarantee how long they would last.

Terry fretted around in helpless anxiety, watching Munro urging his radio engineers onward in the construction of two projectors—one a small affair no larger than a good sized valise, and the other an almost exact replica of the apparatus he had studied aboard the sunken space ship. Hour by hour coils were wound with precise number of turns, condensers fashioned, banks of tubes arranged, special long storage batteries manufactured.

Terry wandered from room to room of the building, gazing through the windows onto the surging flood waters, listened over the radio to the events transpiring in other parts of the world. They were reports that carried the news of death and suffering.

In the United States in particular havoc was abroad. Overflowing rivers and tempest driven seas were twin enemies, sweeping out entire states with ever spreading waters. Farms, outlying districts, villages and cities were all being cut off from one another. Whole cliffs were collapsing, mountains crumbling under the force of incessant earthquakes, dams cracking under the weight of waters and releasing boiling cataracts into valleys below, before which nothing could stand.

Hour in, hour out, tens of thousands of people were fleeing for whatever safety they could find. America, England, Europe; everywhere it was the same. Doom was fast stalking the bursting, groaning world.

Deeply though the news moved him, Terry's thoughts were mainly on the Dallaway mausoleum. Suppose the flood had reached it, had even drowned the girl as she lay in her tomb? That was the thought that anguished his mind. Of course, the mausoleum was on the Dallaway estate outside New York, situated at the top of rising

ground. It was just possible that it might so far have escaped.

For three days he wandered round moodily, then at last Munro burst into the headquarters office, his pale eyes gleaming with satisfaction.

"All set!" he announced crisply. "It's been a hell of a job, but we've made it. One beam radio projector is fixed right here in the building, can easily be trained and guided so that its waves will affect the machinery in the Sahara. Range is well over seven thousand miles, and that's ample. The waves of course will affect anything else they impact on the way, but that doesn't matter since, so far as we know, the Sahara machinery is the only apparatus likely to react to that particular periodicity.

"Our own set is smaller, and portable. Can't take any chances: to be dead certain we've got to be within inches of Miss Dallaway. Well, are you ready?"

"Ready and waiting!" Terry followed the scientist eagerly from the office, wrapped himself in oilskins then went down to the waiting motor boat, Dawlish carrying the small transmitter. Conway had stopped behind to release the giant transmitter on the stroke of three o'clock—two hours hence.

Terry switched on the boat's engine, sent the craft chugging actively through the streaming, muddy waters. Steadily they went on through the tumult, rain pouring remorselessly into their faces. Once they had left the confines of the flooded Corporation grounds they headed out of the city by way of the river-streets, pushed onwards through a natural stormbound Venice across a flooded park, until at last in the somber light of the wild afternoon Terry gave a shout.

"There, Munro! There's the hill! Thank God the waters haven't risen that far yet!"

The scientist gazed at the rising ground in the near distance, the huge granite mausoleum standing in lonely majesty against the storm sky. Further down the slope, the Dallaway residence was flooded to the upper windows, entirely empty of staff. Trees pushed out forlornly from the racing waters.

At last the boat grounded, but some seconds before that happened Terry was out of it and plunging ankle deep in sloshing mud up the slope, bending against the screaming wind and rain, only stopping in breathless anxiety against the sodden heavy oak doors.

"They're locked!" he cried hoarsely, swinging round. "That's something we didn't reckon with — The steward'll have the keys—"

"Be damned to the steward!" Munro retorted, gazing under his dripping hat. "I'm ready for this. Dawlish—the flame gun!"

"Right, chief!" Dawlish tugged the instrument out of his oilskins and fired it— The lock on the great doors went out in a blast of blue fire.

Terry strode through the dispersing smoke into the dank, musty interior, tugged his torch out of his pocket and walked with an unconsciously reverent tread between the massive stone sarcophagi grouped around him. He had eyes for only one of them, paused as he came to it and stared at the inscription—

Elsa Judith Dallaway. Born 1940. Died 1965.

"Ready?" Munro asked.

"Suppose," Terry whispered, as Dawlish set down the apparatus. "that we're wrong? That Elsa really did die? I couldn't bear the sight of . . ."

He stopped, stared round the ghostly shadows and shivered a little. The wind howled round the smashed and creaking doors. Through the gray opening

yawned the waste of tumbling waters.

"I get it," Munro said sympathetically. "We'll look first. Come on, Dawlish—here we go!"

They both eased their shoulders under the sacophagus' lid. Gradually it began to rise, slid gently to one side under the effort of steady heaving. At last it dropped off the edge with a shattering crash. Terry waited, not daring to look—then he heard Munro's whispered voice—

"By all the saints, she *does* live! Terry! Look, man!"

Shaking, he stared into the oblong space. There the girl lay, untouched by the slightest sign of decomposition, her shroud draped on her slender figure, white hands across her breast. The ring caught the blaze of the torch and blazed enigmatically. In the time that had elapsed there was no trace of decay in that silent, beautiful figure.

Terry suddenly came to life, looked up quickly.

"Well, what are we waiting for?" he demanded fiercely. "Let's get busy with that radio! Come on!"

Munro took no offense at the sharp demand. Calmly he took the tarpaulin from the small transmitter, switched on the batteries. Not a sound proceeded from the instrument, but a quivering needle on its dial testified to the surge of power emanating from it.

Only the scream of the wind disturbed the men in those moments. Munro's pale eyes never left the instrument; Terry stared in dumb anguish, which turned to slow awe as presently he saw the girl's eyelashes flicker ever so slightly. A few more minutes and her bosom began to rise and fall gently; she drew in air through parted lips.

"She's c o m i n g back!" Dawlish breathed tensely. "No doubt of it now!"

Terry was incapable of speech or movement. He clung to the edge of the sarcophagus with a clutch of iron.

"Father . . ."

It was Elsa herself who spoke, in a tired, faraway voice.

"Father . . . Where are you? It's so suffocating in here. . . ."

The men glanced at one another. Munro switched off the machine and raised a hand for silence. Rigid, they listened. The girl was not yet conscious, was talking like one rising from anaesthesia.

". . . yes, I know, father. We can take those who believe. But the others; they may try to destroy. They . . ."

The girl sighed deeply, was silent for a while—then with a sudden spasmodic effort she started again.

"Father, why are you so long? The doors—they won't open. Father—I'm choking! I'm cho—"

Her voice broke off abruptly and at that same instant her eyes suddenly opened, big gray eyes that stared in utter bewilderment in the reflected glare from the torch as Terry turned it from blazing into her face.

"What . . .?" she whispered weakly. "Where—where am I? Who are you. . . . ?"

"Elsa, it's me—Terry." He bent down, raised her thinly clad shoulders. Gently he raised her bodily out of the dank tomb and laid her on the blanket Dawlish had brought along. For several minutes she was silent, warmly wrapped up, taking the restorative forced to her lips.

"Oh—Terry," she muttered at last. "What—whatever happened? How did I get here. . . . ? I dreamed the most amazing things—"

"We'll tell you our story later," Munro interjected quickly. "The main point at the moment is to get a story from you—if you're strong enough to tell it, that is?"

The girl nodded slowly. "I'm getting stronger every minute. What do you want to know?"

"Well, just before you recovered consicousness you spoke of your 'father,' and remarked that you were choking—dying. What did you mean?"

"I hardly know. . . ." Elsa pondered for a while. "Just a silly dream, I guess," she said finally. "I had the strangest conviction that I was a girl belonging to a highly scientific race, owning a great city which was being overwhelmed by storms and earthquakes. My father hit on the idea of saving the world and trying to reach Venus at the same time, by sinking a shaft into the earth which had direct contact with the earth's core. There were rings somewhere; rings like. . . ."

She stopped, stared at the ring on her finger, looked up sharply into Munro's face.

"Mr. Munro, what's happened?" she asked sharply.

"Never mind that for the moment, please. What more have you to tell?"

"Very little; I'm almost forgetting it all now. Oh, yes—I remember! We had everything ready. I was in the space ship, and we were waiting for the few people who were loyal to us to come and join us. They didn't arrive, so father went out to find them. He locked the doors as he went out in case any of our enemies might try to get at me and destroy the machinery. The doors were controlled with a radio key, you understand, and could be opened from either inside or outside—but there was only one key, and father had it.

"I remember I seemed to wait for him an interminable time, so long indeed that the air supply began to give out. I tried to break open the walls that hemmed me in, did all I could to escape. But I failed. I had the idea I was choking—"

Elsa broke off, shuddered. "It was horrible. The worst dream I have ever known."

"Was your name Thensla?" asked Munro very quietly.

The girl looked up in stunned amazement. "Yes—now I come to remember, it was! But Mr. Munro, how could you possibly—"

"Listen, my dear. . . ." The scientist leaned forward, laid a lean hand on the girl's blanketed shoulder. Quietly, with his usual impassivity, he told the whole story, throughout which Elsa sat in motionless silence, too astounded to interrupt. When at last it was over she cried,

"Good Heavens, you mean I was actually thought dead? That's why I'm in this horrible place?"

"Exactly!"

"Then—then this Thensla? Was it me? An astral projection or something?"

"No, nothing like that. You *are* Thensla, yet, living again. Call it reincarnation, if you wish. We know now why so many scientific things existed in early times. They had their roots with your race, but the storms scattered your people so much that each succeeding generation of children knew less than their ancestors. One girl alone, after untold generations, was born with a clear memory of the past—almost an actual link—and that girl is you, Elsa."

"But—but how? I don't understand!"

"Is it so difficult? Science today almost universally accepts the belief that death does not end the *entity* of an individual. The entity lives on eternally, is manifested again in other bodies, and continues in such a way until, perhaps, it comes back to the starting point—that is if we accept time as a circle.

"At one period you spoke to Terry of your feeling of detachment from your normal existence. A psychoanalyst would have placed your condition as the influence of events early in this life, or in some other past existence. There are, as we know, many people in the world such as you—who can remember things that have no part in their natural existence, who know of places they have never visited. What else but a memory link with a past state? Which one of us, indeed, has not at some time in his life said—'I have been here before!'?"

Munro paused for a moment, and frowned, went on again slowly.

"The original strain of a past life was so strong in you, my dear, that you even carried your physical appearance across the interval of death. You never had any idea of the real cause of your superficial feelings until certain events repeated themselves. The ring, as I have told you, reacted. The moment you passed into unconsicousness you lost all remembrance of Elsa Dallaway; your mind reverted to a time generations before in another life where the ring had figured so prominently. You described in detail events you had experienced in another form.

"Freud, for instance, has said that dreams of a fixed design can be induced by stimulating a sleeper to certain sounds or sensations. What is false death—your experience—but a particularly vivid dream, wherein all the circumstances exactly matched up to induce in you the memory of a past event?"

"Now I begin to understand," the girl whispered slowly. "The memory of myself as Thensla, the memory of a great feat to be accomplished, that had ended in failure, has remained with me through the generations. . . ." She stopped, looked up slowly. "But how did I ever come to get hold of this second ring?" she demanded.

The scientist shrugged. "That we can never really know—but we can form two guesses. One is that it was originally worn by your father. He left the space ship, never to return—was lost by some unknown cataclysm, killed probably. His ring was found eventually by somebody, and they wore it. So it was handed down through ages upon ages, until at length, it came to you. That is one theory. The other is that if, as Eddington once said, we move in a Time circle, and must eventually repeat certain predominant actions all over again in sequence, the ring was bound by mathematical law finally to reach you and complete the purpose of the events for which it was intended. Not the same ring, of course, but the experiences bound up with it were identical. Call it either chance or unerring inevitability—the fact remains it *did* come to you, and by producing false death, led you back to that other life.

"Last of all, do not forget that in the interval no man until your father—Douglas Dallaway, that is—found a way to get high enough into the stratosphere in order to allow cosmic rays to reach him. At any rate the ring never had cosmic rays upon it until you went up with Terry. From that moment events started to repeat. As is so often said, history repeats itself. . . ."

He broke off in sudden alarm and glanced round anxiously at a sudden violent shaking of the mausoleum. A distinct ripple went through the ground; loose chunks of masonry came clattering down. The wind seemed to scream the louder for a split second.

"Nothing to worry about," Munro said briefly, glancing at his watch. "It's just three o'clock. The shock was the shaft being opened by radio waves—"

"The Sahara shaft!" Elsa cried.

"Exactly; just as I told you. I'd have given anything to see that fountain of fire go into space. The intensity of the explosion can be imagined when we can feel it even at this distance."

"I guess we'd better be getting out of here," Terry said quickly. "I'll carry you, Elsa. We'll see what's happened."

By ten o'clock that night the whole world knew what had happened.

By radio across the earth the news was flashed. Eye witnesses spoke of having seen that living column of incredible fire leap from Africa. The whole world felt the stunning concussion of the explosion, experienced the increase in hurricane created by the superheated wind.

But by ten o'clock the raging winds were abating. A calmer, more settled appearance was over the face of the earth. The incessant earth tremorings of the past weeks were subsiding; volcanic eruptions gradually ceasing—The inner pressure had gone. Nothing of course could return the lands already sunken, but those that had survived were safe at least for another three or four thousand years.

"And by that time," Terry murmured, staring over the flood from the headquarters' windows, "we ought to have gotten sense enough to tame Earth's periodic illnesses."

Elsa, lying in the heavy easy chair beside him, smiled a little.

"I'm not interested in the future, Terry; nor for that matter am I interested any longer in the past. All I want is the present—to see again the blue skies, sunshine, fields of corn."

"You will," Terry promised. "We'll take up where we left off—"

Terry smiled a little, turned to the girl and gently pulled the ring from her right hand.

"What's that for?"

"Just this." He flung the window wide, hurled the ring out into space with all his strength.

For a long time they both sat in the cool, reviving breeze staring at the spot in the flood waters where it had disappeared.

THE OBSERVATORY

(Concluded from page 63)

EVERY time we sit down to do this column, we point out a few yarns in the issue, and a few coming yarns, which we think you ought to give special notice to. We always yell about how swell they are. And occasionally a reader writes in and says "why can't you quit your infernal bragging once in a while?"

Well, we don't think it's bragging. We only want to make sure you read the good stories first and the best stories last. However, just to satisfy those of you who think we aren't playing fair with both sides of the fence, we now intend to announce a treat coming in the December issue.

READERS! Attention please! Do not, by any circumstance, commit yourself to the reading of "Moon of Double Trouble" by A. R. Steber, when it appears! Watch for it and avoid it like the plague! Confidentially, it stinks!

NOW, if you think we are being a little hard on A. R. Steber, the author, please do not be alarmed. He told us himself the story was lousy. Furthermore, he gave us permission to tell you. Said he: "Don't give me a build-up. If the yarn can't stand on its own feet, don't put it on a pedestal; immerse it in concrete and dump it in the Chicago drainage canal."

When a guy asks for it, we give it to him! And please, readers, don't write in praising this story, because we'd like to be right just once!

"COME one, come all and see the ferocious orang-utan on the inside. It took thirty natives to capture the beast and seven never lived to tell the tale." So shouts the circus barker, and gullible America pays its dime and enters the side-show.

But, readers, here's the truth. According to the Netherland Indies conservationists, this whole spiel is just so much bunk. Despite the great strength of the orang-utan, they are not hard to capture. These huge apes do not move very gracefully and are especially clumsy when on the ground. Thus, the best method of capturing them is to force the apes onto the ground. A favorite trick of the natives is to chase the orang-utan until he is tired and stops to rest in a tree. The surrounding trees are then cut down while the orang-

utan watches with amusement. The ape is then smoked out of the tree or is pulled from it with ropes that are noosed and slipped over his head and limbs with long poles.

Just as soon as the ape is on the ground, the natives run up behind him and throw a net over his huge body. The ape is then securely tied up and ready for transportation to some zoo or circus. Once more the Observatory debunks!

REMEMBER "The Island Of Dr. Moreau," by H. G. Wells? Well, here's that story come true, on a small scale. Among the hundreds of interesting exhibitions at the Golden Gate International Exposition, one that drew many visitors, was the display of living salamander freaks in the University of California's scientific exhibit.

The freaks had been produced at the University by performing surgical operations on embryo salamanders. Salamanders were displayed with extra limb buds, or with extra eyes, at various stages of growth and all alive. Each salamander exhibited was accompanied with models and charts to show just how the freak had been produced.

These experimental operations on salamander embryos is a part of the recently organized field of experimental embryology which has brought forth so many facts on the growth processes in the lower animal forms.

ACCORDING to the Department of Commerce, a German scientist has invented a new transparent can which can be used to display canned fruits and vegetables. The can is manufactured from cellulose acetate and was intended for use in food stores to enable people to see what the foods in the cans looked like before they made a purchase.

With the shortage of tin, however, the new invention takes on an added value. The only tin required by the new can is for the top and bottom to give it stability.

MOST people believe that asbestos is a creation of modern science. Well, this is a misconception. Records tell that Marco Polo was shown a piece of cloth that could not be burned when he was in Siberia in 1250 A.D. The superstitious natives thought the cloth was made from salamander skins, but Marco Polo would not accept this explanation. He conducted an extensive investigation by making many inquiries among the natives until he discovered that the fibers from which the cloth was produced were found in a certain rock. The fibers were separated from the rock by pounding in a mortar. The mineral was then called amiantos—it is now known as asbestos.

IN a world torn apart with hate and strife, it is interesting to recall the story of the Christ of the Andes, a huge statue placed 13,000 feet above sea level at Cambre Pass which joins Chili and Argentine.

The armies of Chile and Argentine had been fighting for several years over a boundary dispute when the leaders of both countries realized that the land in dispute was really not worth what it was costing in blood and money. A peace was consummated and a lasting border was established by agreement between Chili and Argentine. The two countries ordered that a huge monument be cast from the bronze in the cannon formerly used by the two armies. It was to show a huge Christ, twenty-six feet high, standing on a globe that represents the earth. This statue was then to be mounted on a tall column. In one hand the figure of Christ was to hold a cross and the other hand was to be extended in everlasting blessing of the enduring peace that has continued from the day the monument was erected in March, 1904, till the present.

The inscription at the base of the monument reads as follows:

"Sooner shall these mountains crumble to dust than shall the people of Argentine and Chili break the peace to which they have pledged themselves at the feet of Christ the Redeemer."

HOW hot are the stars? A reader asked us that question and we decided to find out. So we asked a few questions.

According to the Smithsonian Institution, an instrument has been invented which can measure the heat of a star billions of miles from earth. The instrument was constructed by Dr. Charles G. Abbot and W. H. Hoover, and consists of an electrical galvanometer which is so sensitive that it can be used to detect a change in current as small as one ten-trillionth of an ampere. The device is used to measure the tiny fluctuations of a thermocouple.

And we find out that some of the stars are so hot that they have a surface temperature of 30,000 degrees C. Boy! Is that hot! But we can be staggered even more; because we find that interior temperatures *might* be in the millions of degrees C. Even with the thermocouple, we can't definitely answer that question. But let it go. We agree the stars are hot!

A SURE-FIRE way to tell the difference between a real and a cultured pearl is with X-rays. If the pearl is natural, the X-rays will be scattered uniformly after impinging on the pearl and this produces a six- or twelve-fold "soft" pattern. If the pearl is cultured, the pattern formed by the scattered rays will be a maltese-cross.

THE shore birds never need be bothered with the problem of being overcrowded. The female lays eggs that are nearly perfect triangles. If four eggs are put together they form an almost perfect circle thus cutting down on the space required for a nest.

And triangular eggs seems to be a perfect place to quit observing for this month! *Rap.*

There were a lot of unusual things happening to Higginson; for instance, ghosts that told him things he oughtn't to know

Something swept over the corpse; came at him with cold fingers . . .

Next Time I'll Get You

By ANTON REED

FOR several months Higginson shiveringly suspected he was learning too much, but not until the incident of the truck did he fully realize that the knowledge he was gaining was terribly dangerous.

Higginson was a shy little man, timid almost to the point of cowardice. He wore drab clothes and on the street no one ever seemed to notice his existence. He had no friends and not even any close acquaintances. For all the world knew of him, he might not have existed at all. To the casual eye, his life was drab and colorless.

And yet no jungle explorer ever faced a more dangerous situation than did Higginson. Oddly he did not realize how dangerous it was until the incident of the truck forcibly called it to his attention.

Higginson had spent the evening pursuing his peculiar researches and he was returning home when the first unusual incident occurred. He came to a street intersection and being Higginson, he stopped and looked in both di-

rections before he started to cross. With the exception of a truck, which was approaching on a cross street, there was not a car in sight. There were traffic signals on the corner and the red light was in favor of Higginson and against the truck. He looked at the light to make sure it was in his favor. Then he stepped into the street, confident that the light would stop the truck.

The truck didn't stop. It went straight through the red light. It was almost on top of Higginson before he realized it wasn't going to stop. In the split second before it hit him, the driver saw him, and jerked frantically at the steering wheel. Higginson, as frantic as the driver, leaped to one side. Tires screamed on the pavement.

The fender scraped him as the truck grated to a stop.

"You blasted fool!" Higginson shouted at the driver. "Why don't you watch where you're going?"

The driver stuck his head out of the cab. "You damned idiot!" he raged. "What the hell do you mean by walking across the street against the lights?"

"I didn't walk against the lights!" Higginson shouted. "The lights were in my favor."

"Like hell they were!" the driver retorted. "You damned fool, look for yourself." He pointed at the traffic signal.

The amber section of the light was glowing. While Higginson stared at it, the amber winked out and the light turned red. Only it was the top light that turned red. The bottom of the three lights, which in this system of traffic signals was always the green light, winked out.

It was this bottom light that Higginson had thought was showing red. "It *was* red!" he protested feebly. "I'm positive it was. I looked before I crossed the street."

"How in the hell could it have been red?" the driver angrily demanded. "You just saw the green turn out yourself. You saw it turn red. The warning light wasn't even showing when I came up to the intersection. What the hell are you trying to do—fake an accident so you can sue my insurance company for damages?"

Higginson had no answer. He knew he had *thought* the light was red and was in his favor. For several minutes the angry truck driver swore at him, then, still muttering that "the damned fool pedestrians ought to get run over and killed," he shoved the truck in gear and continued on his way.

HIGGINSON was left badly shaken. He had a horror of automobile accidents. The fact that he had almost been the victim of one left him terribly frightened. He hurried to the safety of the sidewalk and stood there. He was trembling all over and sweat was pouring from his body.

But, after all, it had only been an accident. And accidents are likely to happen to anybody. He could not understand how he had mistaken the color of the light but perhaps he had been preoccupied and had not really noticed whether the red or the green was showing.

He wiped the sweat from his face and forced himself to be calm. Except for a bad scare, he hadn't been hurt. He had almost regained control of his startled nerves when the voice spoke. The voice seemed to come from nowhere.

"Next time I'll get you!" the voice said.

Higginson almost jumped out of his skin. He looked wildly around. There was no one within a block of him. A tide of white swept all color from his

face. *Something he could not see had spoken to him!*

This was the first time he had heard a voice speak out of nowhere but he knew what was happening. *They* were after him. Somehow they had learned of his researches, had discovered that he was learning too much. They were trying to kill him. They would kill him, unless he could evade them. The fact that they were, under ordinary circumstances, invisible and intangible, made them no less dangerous.

He knew, the second he heard the voice, that the truck going through what he had thought was a red light had not been an accident. It had been a deliberate attempt to murder him, to destroy him, because he knew too much about *them*. He did not know exactly how it had been worked but the purpose was unmistakable—to kill him.

Panic made a madhouse of his mind. Somewhere near him in the darkness something that he could not see was lurking. His reaction was instinctive—he ran. Fortunately this was a quiet section of the city and the streets were almost deserted or the spectacle of a man running from nothing would have attracted attention. He turned down a side street and dodged into an alley. From the alley he passed through a back yard and into another street. He continued down this street for another block and dodged into another alley. The only thought in his mind was to run, to hide in the darkness like a hunted animal, like a rabbit fleeing from a pack of hounds. The hounds from which he fled were invisible.

The voice did not speak again. He did not know whether or not he had outdistanced it but he did know he could run no farther. He had entered a park. He staggered to a bench and sat down.

Around him in the night the city slept in silence. He was at the edge of the park and he knew that in the apartment houses across the street were hundreds of people, none of whom knew that in the dark outside their snug homes strange creatures roamed. He listened for the voice. When it did not come again, he regained control of his panic-stricken mind.

"I have to hide," he said to himself. He did not in the least doubt that if he did not hide he would die. His researches had clearly revealed a number of strange deaths among the men who had dropped hints about *their* existence.

Higginson had discovered their existence by accident. He was assistant librarian in the public library, and one day, in glancing through a volume of Poe, he had been suddenly struck by the idea that Poe was hinting rather strongly about the existence of supernatural creatures on earth. Poe had not come right out and said they did exist but his hints had seemed to convey the impression that he knew more than he felt safe in telling.

THE idea had intrigued Higginson. He had pursued it farther. To his shocked surprise he had discovered that dozens of writers had hinted at the same thing. Usually they had not come out into the open and clearly said what they meant but always in the background there were hints that they knew more than they were telling. For centuries authors had seemingly been trying to warn their fellow men that strange creatures walked the earth and to be on the alert against them!

And—savage warning—there had been a heavy mortality rate among the writers who had talked too much. If an author spoke too clearly of what was on his mind, something seemed to happen to him. He turned into a drunkard or a drug addict or committed

suicide or died under suspicious circumstances.

Higginson had gone thoroughly into the matter. He had combed thousands of books, seeking those elusive hints. He had joined strange secret societies. He had learned enough to frighten him.

Because he had no name for them, he called them the Powers of Darkness. Or simply *They*. *They* did not want the human race to know about them. If a human learned too much about them, that human died.

Higginson had a small notebook filled with notes he had taken about them. He wondered if they would leave him alone if he burned the book. He took it out of his pocket. He hated to burn that book. Years of effort had gone into gathering the data it contained. But—

He sought a secluded spot in the park, tore out the leaves, struck a match to them. The tiny fire burned brightly for a moment, then died down to ashes.

"Now are you satisfied?" Higginson whispered from bloodless lips. "Now will you leave me alone?"

From somewhere in the darkness around him a laugh sounded.

Higginson fought against panic. Burning the book had not helped. *He* still knew what was in it.

Nor could he go to them and try to bargain, offer to trade his silence for his life. They were implacable and they would not bargain. They were not traders, bartering this for that, haggling over prices like merchants on a back street. They did not need to bargain.

Nor could he fight back against them. They were too strong. If he could have spent a few more years gathering data, fitting facts together, he might have learned how to fight them. But they were too clever to give him that much time. They struck first. They always struck first. That was one of the secrets of their power.

His only hope was to hide.

Higginson was not married. No one was dependent on him. He lived in a rooming-house but he knew better than to go back there and he knew better than to return to his job. He had a little money.

He waited in the park until morning. Nothing happened. If they were watching him, they made no move. He rented another room and decided to spend most of his time in the park.

He spent a week in the park. When nothing happened, his courage began to increase. Perhaps, after all, they were going to leave him alone. Perhaps they had been unable to find him. Perhaps they had decided he was no longer dangerous to them. It was dusk when he saw the girl moving toward him. She was walking fast, looking back over her shoulder at a man who was following her. The man walked in a half-crouch, his head and shoulders hunched forward, his eyes never leaving the girl.

The man was carrying a knife in his hand.

The girl screamed and started to run.

The man waved the knife and ran after her.

The girl saw Higginson.

"He's crazy!" she shouted, pointing back at the man. "He's trying to kill me. Don't let him hurt me."

THE man had a butcher knife in his hand. It had a blade at least six inches long. There was a glazed look in his eyes and his face was set in an emotionless cast. He ran toward the girl. Higginson shoved her behind him.

The killer seemed to forget all about the girl. He concentrated on Higginson. The knife blade glittered as he

lunged forward.

Higginson picked up the park bench and hit the man over the head with it. Under ordinary circumstances he could barely have lifted the bench but with a crazy man armed with a knife about to disembowel him, his muscles seemed to develop superhuman strength. The bench crashed over the head of the killer. The knife flew out of his hands and he slumped to the ground.

A park policeman, attracted by the screams of the girl, came running up. "What's going on here?" he demanded.

"He tried to kill me," the girl sobbed. "He—he thought he was in love with me and when I—I turned him down, he went crazy. This man saved my life." She pointed to Higginson.

"Good goin', buddy," the cop said. "What's your name? You'll get your picture in the paper for this."

Higginson turned pale. "It was nothing," he said. "Anyone else would have done the same."

"Don't be so modest," the cop said. He turned his attention to the would-be killer. When he looked up, Higginson had disappeared.

Higginson did not want his name in the paper. He had managed to evade them for a week but if he received a lot of publicity, they would learn where he was hiding. Slipping furtively through the shrubbery he dodged out of sight.

He was a hundred yards away from the cop and the girl when the voice spoke, gratingly, as if it were getting really angry now, in his ear.

"Next time you won't escape!" the voice said.

Higginson ran until his straining legs would no longer support him, until his lungs threatened to burst, until his heart seemed on the verge of tearing itself from his chest. He ran clear out of the park and when he could no longer run, he walked. When he could walk no farther, he staggered to the nearest place where he could sit down, which happened to be the stone steps in front of a public building of some kind.

They had known he was in the park! They had known where he was all the time.

How could he hide from them?

He thought of leaving the city.

They would follow him.

He thought of changing his name and finding a room in the slums, some greasy tenement where, like a hunted criminal, he could avoid the light of day.

They would follow him. No matter what name he chose for himself, they would know him. No matter what kind of a disguise he adopted, they could penetrate it.

He thought of sneaking away to some spot in the North Woods, of hiding in the wilderness.

They would follow him there.

Where could he hide?

When he had regained his breath, he got to his feet, knowing only that he had to try to escape. Not until then did he notice the building behind him.

It was a police station.

An idea entered his mind, a way to escape. He entered the police station.

THE desk sergeant looked up from his reports as Higginson entered. He looked his vistor over. "What do you want?" he said gruffly.

"I want you to lock me up," Higginson answered.

"Lock you up!" the astonished sergeant gasped. He looked closely at Higginson and frowned. "You got your nerve with you," he said. "Wanting to sleep in the station in the summer! In winter, now, when you ain't got no other place to go, we let the likes of

you sleep in here, but in the summer you bums can sleep in the park."

"I'm not a bum," Higginson said.

"Then what in the devil do you want to sleep in the station for?" the sergeant demanded.

"I didn't say I wanted to sleep here," Higginson pointed out. "I said I wanted to be locked up."

The sergeant leaned back in his chair and looked thoughtfully at this man. There was a puzzled frown on his forehead. From time to time, he knew, wanted criminals had walked into the nearest station and given themselves up to the law. But he did not recognize Higginson as a wanted man.

"What have you done to be locked up?" the sergeant asked.

"I haven't done anything," Higginson answered.

"Then what do you want to be locked up for?"

"Because, if I'm locked up, nobody can get to me," Higginson said triumphantly. "I'll be safe."

In a cell, he would be safe! The solution to his problem was so simple he wondered why he had not thought of it before.

A baffled look appeared on the sergeant's face. His eyes went over Higginson again. "Somebody after you?" he said at last.

Higginson hesitated. "Well, yes," he said.

"Who is it?" the sergeant asked.

"I—I don't want to say."

The sergeant pounded the desk with his fist. "What kind of a run-around are you trying to give me?" he demanded. "If your life is being threatened, tell us who is doing it and we will see that you get protection. We're here to protect the public. But you've got to co-operate with us. Who is after you?"

"I—I don't know their names?" Higginson faltered.

The sergeant looked astonished. Then he looked grim. "Beat it!" he said.

"You mean for me to leave?" Higginson faltered.

"I don't mean anything else," the sergeant answered. "If you want us to help you, you've got to work with us. Either tell me who is after you or get the hell out of here."

"All right," Higginson blurted in desperation. "I'll tell you. The Powers of Darkness are after me!"

"The Powers of—" the sergeant got no farther. He stared at Higginson.

"Now will you let me stay in a cell?" Higginson faltered.

"Of course," the sergeant said hastily. "Why didn't you tell me about the Powers of—about that in the first place? You just wait in here a few minutes while I have a cell fixed up for you."

He led Higginson to a small waiting room. "You just wait here," he repeated. "It won't be very long."

He closed the door, leaving the librarian alone. Higginson felt a vast relief. He had been doubtful about the police believing his story. But they had believed it, they were going to let him stay in a cell, and everything would be all right. In a police station he would be safe from automobile accidents and from madmen.

FIFTEEN minutes later the sergeant opened the door of the room. Two white-clad men were with him. "Here he is, boys," the sergeant said to the two men.

They entered the room.

Higginson rose to his feet. "Wait a minute," he said. "Who are you men? What is this? Where are you taking me?"

He was afraid he recognized the

white uniforms the two men were wearing.

"Everything is going to be all right," one of the men said. "You don't need to worry about anything. We're not going to hurt you."

Taking his arms, they escorted him outside. An ambulance was waiting.

"But I don't want to go there," Higginson protested.

The men in white were gentle but firm. They helped him into the ambulance and sat in the back with him. Siren whining the big car drilled through the night. It pulled to a halt in front of the City Sanitarium for the Insane.

The resident psychiatrist was a Dr. Morgan, a young man with a clean, sympathetic face and thoughtful eyes.

"But I'm not crazy!" Higginson protested to Dr. Morgan. "Why was I brought here when I'm not insane?"

"You asked to be locked up in a cell, didn't you?" the doctor asked gravely.

"Yes," Higginson answered. "But I meant in a police station."

"Only criminals may be kept in police stations," Dr. Morgan explained. "You aren't a criminal and consequently the police could not grant your request. That's why they called us to come and get you. We can give you what you want, a nice strong cell where you will be safe."

"Oh!" Higginson gasped in relief. Now he understood why he had been brought here. Under the circumstances, naturally, the police could not give him what he wanted. "You mean you're going to help me?" he continued.

"Certainly," the doctor emphatically said. "That is our business—helping people. Now if you will tell me more about the Powers of Darkness that are threatening you, it is possible that we may be able to work out some way of overcoming them."

"Do you really think they can be overcome?" Higginson whispered.

"I don't see why not," the doctor answered. "Tell me about them."

"But it may be dangerous for you to know," Higginson said doubtfully.

"A doctor has to take chances," the physician answered.

Higginson began hesitantly, but under the warm sympathy of the physician he was soon telling the whole story. And he discovered, as he related the step by step process by which he had deduced the existence of the Powers, that it was a great relief to have someone to tell the story to. He had never told anyone about his discoveries. Just talking to someone about them made him feel better. The doctor nodded understandingly.

"You say they tried to kill you having a truck run over you?" the physician questioned.

"Yes," Higginson answered eagerly.

"But how did you know this was not an accident?" the doctor asked.

"Because of the voice," Higginson explained.

"Ah, yes, the voice," the doctor said. "And the madman in the park. How did you know he wasn't really after the girl and you just happened to be in the way at the time?"

"The voice told me again," Higginson answered.

"Ah, yes," the doctor said.

"Do—do you really think you can overcome them?" Higginson doubtfully asked. "They are very powerful, you know. And most of the time they are invisible. Ordinary weapons like a gun or a knife will not hurt them at all."

"Certainly we can overcome them," the doctor said.

"How?" Higginson eagerly asked.

"It is really very easy," the doctor said. "To overcome them, all you have to do is to realize they don't exist."

"They don't exist!" Higginson gasped. "How can you say they don't exist when twice they almost killed me? I have heard them talking. I *know* they exist!"

THE doctor kept his face composed. A careless smile, the wrong expression, a tone of voice that was slightly off, at this moment, might ruin all chances of effecting a cure. He was a psychiatrist, experienced in dealing with mental disorders. The story Higginson had told him, he had heard before, dozens of times, from other people, with slight variations. The insane asylums were jammed with people who thought they heard voices, who thought they were being pursued by enemies who sought to kill them. A persecution complex, where the victim imagines he is being threatened, was one of the commonest of mental ailments.

"The accidents were merely accidents," the doctor said calmly.

"But I was almost killed," Higginson protested. "If I had been a second later in jumping out of the way, that truck would have run over me."

"I don't doubt it," the doctor said. "But such accidents happen to all of us. I was out driving myself yesterday afternoon. A car pulled directly in front of me. Only by the narrowest margin did I manage to swerve to one side and avoid a bad smash-up."

"That *was* an accident," Higginson said.

"And the truck that almost ran over you was also an accident," the doctor emphatically answered. "The madman in the park was not after you. He was after the girl. You just happened to be on hand and when you thwarted him, he attacked you. He would have attacked anyone else who tried to protect the girl."

There was conviction in the doctor's voice. He spoke like a man who knew what he was talking about. Higginson, in spite of himself, began to have the suspicion that the physician was right.

"But the voices—" Higginson protested weakly. The accidents might have been accidents without the voices.

"They were hallucinations," the doctor answered.

"I'm certain I heard them," Higginson said.

"I do not doubt you," the physician replied. "But in this hospital, right in this room, I have talked to hundreds of people who also thought they had heard voices. They don't really hear them. They just imagine they do. Hallucinations are a very common form of mental illness."

Higginson's first reaction to the doctor's words was a feeling of utter bewilderment but mingled with the bewilderment was a sense of growing relief. After all, if he were crazy, if he had imagined the accidents and the voices, then he was in no danger. For the first time in months he was consicous of a feeling of happiness deep within him. If the doctor was right—but the doctor spoke like a man who knew what he was talking about. It was his business to know. He had had experience in dealing with such problems. And other people had heard voices, people who were unquestionably insane. Therefore—

The doctor smiled gently. From the expressions on Higginson's face he was able to follow the latter's mental reactions. He dared to smile. "I think it is entirely possible that we will be able to cure your illness," he said. "Of course, you must co-operate with us—"

"I'll co-operate!" Higginson interrupted. "If you're sure you can help me, I'll do everything I can to co-operate."

"I think rest and quiet will do the trick," the doctor answered. "I think

I can safely say that within a few months you will be as sound as a new dollar. Shall we—" He rose to his feet. "Shall we go upstairs so I can show you to your room?"

"Oh, yes," Higginson said eagerly.

Slipping into bed before the watchful eyes of the physician, Higginson was consicous of a feeling of vast relief. There weren't any such things as the Powers of Darkness. The accidents had been merely accidents and the voices he had thought he had heard had been hallucinations. He told the doctor how he felt.

"THAT is a very good sign," the physician said. "Once you fully realize you were hallucinating, you are well on the way to recovery. Now I'll fix you a little medicine so you can go right to sleep."

Higginson watched the doctor carefully measure out medicine into a spoon. Gratefully he gulped it down.

"Thanks, doc," he said. "Thanks for taking such good care of me."

"It's part of my job," the doctor answered. "Sleep tight, old fellow, and tomorrow morning you will awaken feeling like a new man."

The door clicked softly behind him as he left the room. Higginson, snug in the bed, felt at peace with the world. Gone was the dragging dead weight of the knowledge he had thought he had possessed, the deadly dangerous knowledge about the Powers of Darkness and how they preyed on the human race. There weren't any such things as the Powers of Darkness. They were merely the mad imaginings of disordered minds.

Higginson sighed. The room was quiet and peaceful. He could feel sleep, like a blissful feeling of delicious security, creeping over him.

Suddenly he sat up in bed and looked wildly around.

Somewhere near him a voice had sounded.

"I told you I'd get you," the voice said.

For a second, he was on the verge of panic. Then he remembered what the doctor had said.

"You'll never get me!" he said triumphantly. "You don't exist. You're only a hallucination coming out of my own mind."

The voice did not answer. Higginson lay back down and promptly went to sleep.

THE doctor paused only long enough to change his white uniform for a business suit before he left the hospital. Although he had a car, he chose to walk. Three blocks away from the hospital, he turned down an alley.

Although the alley was dark, he was aware of two shadows that were darker than the blackness of the night. One of the shadows, the bigger one, was quiet. It seemed to be a critical observer, an overseer who had come in to examine the work of a subordinate.

The smaller shadow spoke to the physician. "Report!" it said.

"He is dead by now," the doctor answered. He stood like a man held in a trance and the words seemed to come unwillingly from his throat.

"Did you give him an over-dose of the sleeping medicine?" the smaller shadow demanded.

"Yes," the physician answered.

"Will it seem to be an accident?" the larger shadow spoke for the first time.

"Certainly," the doctor said. "It can't very well be anything else."

"Good!" the smaller shadow exulted. "Dismiss."

Like an automaton, the doctor turned and started to leave the alley. The bigger shadow grunted. As though the grunt reminded him of something the

smaller shadow called hastily after the physician.

"Wait a minute."

The doctor returned. Standing stiffly erect, he waited.

The smaller shadow extended taloned hands and made swift passes before the eyes of the doctor. "You will remember none of this," his voice intoned. "You will never recall meeting us here. You will think you went for a walk and when you return to the hospital you will not remember having seen us. Nor will you ever remember."

Abruptly the voice changed. "Dismiss!" it said.

The doctor strode stiffly out of the alley. He went down the street walking like a man out for a casual stroll.

WHEN he had gone, the smaller shadow spoke. "Master," it said placatingly. "You see it is well done."

"I see it is done," the larger shadow said. "But not well done. Twice your accidents failed to come off as planned and even now you almost forgot to erase from the mind of the doctor all knowledge of what he had done while under your control. What if you had permitted him to remember giving an over-dose of the sleeping medicine, what if you had let him remember meeting *us?* What of *that*, Knurl?"

"Master," Knurl whined. "I was excited. And after all, this was my first case."

"The more reason to do a good job," the larger shadow said reprovingly.

"Master," Knurl protested. "It seems foolish to me to be so round-about in destroying one of these humans. Why would you not let me slay him directly, without going to all the trouble to cause what seemed to be accidents. To control his mind, so that he thought that green light was red, to control that madman and that girl, so they would go where I wanted them to, and especially to control this surgeon, was most difficult. Why do I have to resort to such subterfuges when it would have been so easy to kill him directly? Pouf! I could have blown his life out like that."

"Because we must work that way!" the larger shadow said emphatically. "I have explained this to you before, Knurl, and I do not wish to have to explain it again. These humans who gain too much knowledge, and thus become a threat to us, they must seem to die by accident, because if we slew them directly, other humans, seeing the manner in which they died, might become suspicious. They might put two and two together and thus learn about us. If they once learned about us, in spite of our knowledge and our powers, they would be dangerous enemies. Remember there are billions of them on earth, and only a few of us, and if they once gained full knowledge of us, they would certainly wage war against us. I need not tell you what *that* would mean."

"But this Higginson was not important," the smaller shadow protested. "He didn't know very much. He was just begininng to learn really important things when we spotted him. No one cared anything about him and no one would have believed anything he said. The police sergeant did not believe him, the doctor did not believe him. No matter how he died, no one would have thought anything of it."

"That's what *you* think!" the larger shadow said. "You are young, and almost as stupid as a human. No, Knurl, we must work always in the dark. Do you understand now, Knurl, or must I take measures to see that you do understand?"

"I understand, Master," Knurl hastily said. "I will not err in this respect again."

"See that you don't!" the larger

shadow said menacingly.

"I won't, Master. I won't," Knurl protested.

"All right," the larger shadow said. "We must go now. See if you can manage to vanish without creating too much of a disturbance."

"I can do that, Master," Knurl eagerly said. "Watch me if you doubt my ability."

Soundlessly, like a puff of smoke fleeing before the wind, the smaller shadow merged into the darkness and disappeared. The larger shadow regarded the performance with a certain grudging approval.

Then it vanished too, leaving the alley deserted and untenated.

THE next morning, Higginson was found dead in bed. He was too unimportant to rate an autopsy and on the death certificate the cause of death was given as heart failure. Thus not even Dr. Morgan ever knew how Higginson had really died.*

* This story came in unsolicited. An accompanying note said that the author, for reasons that he deemed sufficient, was using a pen name. The author asked us, if we published the story, to respect the pen name and not to reveal his identity.

Because it seemed to be a good story, we bought it.

Now, as this issue of the magazine goes to press, there comes a letter from the author's wife, stating that three days ago the author *was killed in an automobile accident* and suggesting that under these circumstances it might not be advisable for us to publish the story, hinting even that it might be dangerous for us to publish it.

But we believe that if the author chose to present certain startling facts in fictional form, in other words, if he really knew what he was writing about, then the world needs this story. On the other hand, if the author were writing pure fiction and if his unfortunate death *was* really an accident, then no danger can result from publishing this story.

Frankly, we are in a quandry. We feel it our duty to warn the reader that this is fiction. But, on the other hand, maybe it isn't fiction.—Ed.

SCIENCE LOOKS AT SWIMMING

By WILLIS WHITE

IF people react to swimming and exercise in the same way as monkeys do, then you had better note with interest the results obtained by Dr. Sidney O. Levinson, of Michael Reese Hospital, Chicago, from his studies on monkeys. Dr. Levinson experimented with monkeys in an attempt to prove or disprove the theory long held by doctors that the tiring effects of swimming or other intensive exercise renders a person more susceptible to an attack of infantile paralysis.

For the experiment, he used 41 monkeys which were divided up into three test groups. The members of group number one were left alone. The members of group two were put into water up to their necks and held there so that they could not swim about. The members of group three were put into a tank of water and made to swim about until they were exhausted. A standard strain of infantile paralysis virus was then injected into all the monkeys which should have produced a disease having a low mortality rate, but a fairly fixed degree of paralysis.

The effect of the injection on group one consisting of fourteen monkeys was as follows: Not one monkey became paralyzed in all four limbs and seven escaped the disease entirely. One became paralyzed in one limb and five became paralyzed in the legs and lower part of the body. The last one became paralyzed on one side of the body and on one limb of the other side of his body.

Group two consisting of twelve monkeys were effected as follows: While two escaped the disease entirely, there were six cases of paralysis of all four limbs. One monkey became paralyzed on one side and on one limb of the other side of his body. Three became paralyzed in the legs and lower part of the body.

The fifteen members of group three, where the greatest exertion took place, were effected as follows: Four monkeys escaped the disease, but seven became paralyzed in the legs and lower part of the body. Three became paralyzed in all four limbs and one became paralyzed in the face.

Dr. Levinson concluded from the results obtained that only being in the water weakens the body almost as much as swimming does. He thought that the chilling effect of water might have caused this, but was not absolutely sure

As a result of these experiments, it might be wise to prevent children from catching a chill from swimming, or excessively tiring themselves at play when there is an epidemic of infantile paralysis in the vicinity.

DWELLERS OF

TENSION crackled through the crowded emergency elevator. The faces of the passengers were like smears of wax under the light's glare. Taney's fingers were unsteady on the lever as he sought Eric Balt's eyes.

"All set, sir?" his voice trembled a little.

"Let's go."

In Eric's ears the shrieking of emergency sirens in the street faded swiftly as the car plunged. His gaze strayed to the chunky man at the controls. Taney was scared. Atomic Power Plant Eighteen was no kindergarten to work in.

"How many men down there, Taney?" Eric asked quietly.

"Twenty, sir," said Taney. "I went over everything this morning, sir. Prior will vouch for that."

"Compressors? Gauges?"

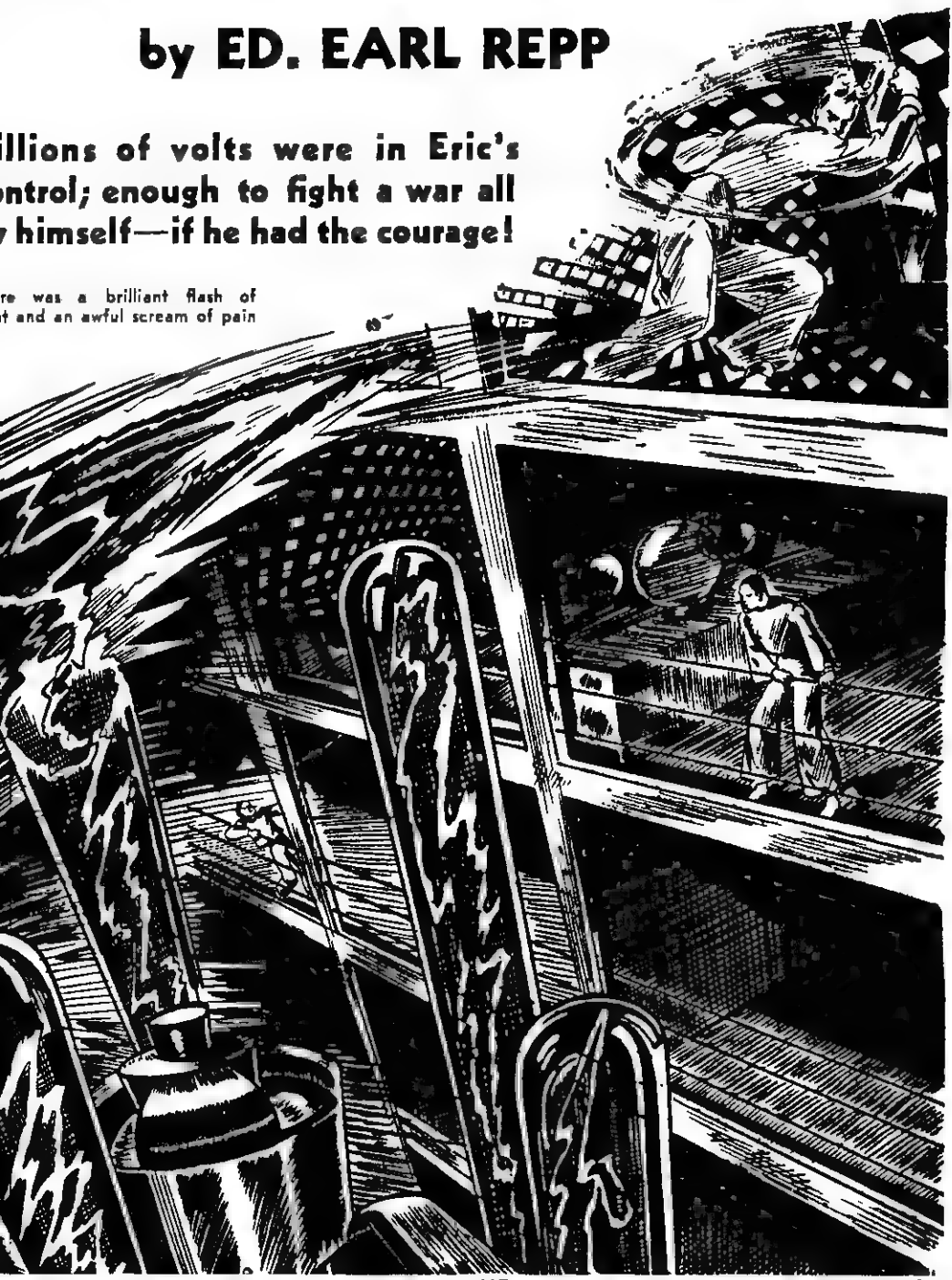
"Checked them best I could," Taney

THE DARKNESS

by ED. EARL REPP

illions of volts were in Eric's ontrol; enough to fight a war all himself—if he had the courage!

re was a brilliant flash of t and an awful scream of pain



replied. "They weren't what you'd bet your pay on. I put in a requisition for new ones four months ago."

Among the rescue crew there was a muttering and a sprinkle of oaths. Crowbars and torches rattled as hard-eyed, angry men stirred.

Eric Balt's own jaws ribbed with tough muscle. Four months ago the directors of Sparta Power Corporation had accepted Taney's request for new equipment. This morning Balt's office had got it back with a pink memo attached:

"Check on urgency of replacement."

Every nut, bolt, and plate in Sparta City needed replacement . . . urgently.

"Your Inspector Villard is down there somewhere, sir. I'm afraid he's gone with the rest of the fission-room crew!"

Eric heard Taney with half his mind. Five times since he had become Maintenance Superintendent he had been rushed to the scene of a disaster to supervise the removal of bodies and repair of equipment. It had got so that he started up in the night, hearing the wail of emergency sirens, feeling a tremor ripple under the city as scores of men died horribly.

Yet it took a tragedy like this to push a requisition through!

TANEY moved swiftly down the hall as if his own life were at stake. His stubby body slewed around the baffle-plates like a runaway tractor. He was chunkily-built, bald-headed, and he filled his brown overalls to capacity. Eric had to work to keep up with him.

As they ran on, the thick slabs of steel, designed to hinder explosion-forces from reaching the elevator, grew more and more twisted. A foggy seep of light came from somewhere. A cat might have stumbled, but these men ran surely. Exposed since birth to escaped rays from atomic power plants, something happened to make their eyes intensively sensitive to infra-red light. That was the one advantage of life in Sparta City. They reached a point where the baffles had been ripped from the concrete walls and jammed together in a tangle that blocked the corridor.

Torches hissed blue-white, and the crackling of rusty scale released choking fumes. Eric felt the rugged surface of the plates sear the palms of his gloves as he helped drag severed baffles aside. The final plate clanged on the cement floor.

Taney was across it and charging into the fission-room. He stopped short in the knee-deep rubble of twisted steel and shattered concrete, his squarish bald head swivelling to search the wreckage. On the right-hand wall was a vast splatter of crimson-and-gray that had once been the operator of the fission chamber. The rest of the fission-room crew—and perhaps Clay Villard, chief inspector for Balt's office—lay buried beneath the floor-litter.

Eric stumbled to the jagged hole in the left-hand wall. Broken chunks of cement began to fly as the emergency squad went to work.

The fission chamber itself, visible through the great rent in the wall, was practically unharmed. Yellow tendrils of heavy gas drooled from a line of ports that led to the compressors.

Suddenly Eric Balt wanted to curse it, to attack it like something human. Through that pipe had come the pressure that snuffed out the lives of twenty men.

It hadn't needed to happen! That idea hammered savagely at his brain. Carelessness had done it. Criminal carelessness!

Eric's mind reconstructed the tragedy from the clues about him.

Right here, the operator had stood,

where Eric was standing. His darting eyes had followed an array of vacillating needles, where Eric looked through a ragged hole smashed fist-like through a steel wall. His fingers had moved over the controls, and as they touched and lingered, rebellious atoms were tamed. The power at his finger-tips—!

One dart of his finger and a sprag of screaming rubidium photons poured upon a glittering crystal of U-235—physicists' lingo for uranium isotope 235. Nothing happened—yet. Pressure was the Philosopher's Stone.

The hiss and clank of the compressors grew more rapid. The heavy yellow gas in the fission chamber was almost liquid. Danger entered. . . .

Pressure blunted the speeding photon-bullets — tuned them to the frequency of the target. Where, before they had passed through the uranium without harming it, they now splattered heavily against the unstable atoms; shattered them, transformed the U-235 into krypton, barium, rubidium, however the fission went.

The resultant energy was 5,000,000 times greater than that released in the burning of coal! No wonder the operators' nerves broke down in a few months' time!

Every fissioned atom gave up 200,000,000 electron volts in the form of new, headlong photons released. Slow those photons down, as the gas would if under too great pressure; direct them *en masse* at a cluster of other U-235 atoms—and the chain was started that only complete explosion could terminate. The line between inefficiency and disaster was measured in insignificant decimals.

An operator must be vigilant. His tools must be right.

This man's compressors had been faulty. He was dead, now, with nineteen of his companions.

ERIC'S eyes, of that blue-gray color peculiar to the Spartans, speared back through the darkness at Taney.

"What's that?"

Taney's sweat-streaked features pinched. "I thought it was you! It came from—" He fell silent, cocking an ear at a far-away tapping.

"—the safety-lock!" Eric rapped. He sprang to a battered door in the near wall.

Torches cut through the twisted wreck of the door. Steel screeched, and the thick plate went reeling inward. Out of the black hole stumbled a wild figure with a bloody slash across one cheek, his gray-green uniform soiled and torn.

For a moment Eric failed to connect this scarecrow figure with anyone he knew. The man leaned heavily against the wall, his numbed gaze holding, horrified, on the bodies arrayed on stretchers. Eric started.

"Villard! How in — !"

The maintenance inspector's voice was a windy croak. "I was inside—when it happened. Operator said to check—split in a seam-weld. He was right! Damn' wind nearly blew my head off when it ripped!"

Eric gripped his arm. "You checked the compressors before the explosion?"

Villard flung an arm in the direction of the fission chamber. "Junk! Not fit to pump automobile tires!"

The cold pinch of gray frost coated Balt's words. "I'll want that in writing. They've sent back too many rush requisitions. I'm going to make a test case out of this."

"What's the use?" Taney's words were blunt with hopelessness. "Inspector Borch is on his way over, now. The complaint will have to go through him. You can bet your calipers it'll get pigeon-holed before any director sees it."

"*Damn* Inspector Borch! I'm going

to Warren Kayser himself! He and his Big Eight are going to talk turkey. Wages and hours, safety precautions, and a lot of other delicate subjects!"

"That's fine," Villard commented sourly. "You're going to beard the ogre in his den. So what? We've tried to raise a stink before. You know the answer we'll get?

"We're Spartans, toughened to filth and poverty. We and our ancestors have lived in these hell-hole power cities for four generations. Danger? We love it. We don't need a raise in wages because we get board and keep free. Flea-bags to sleep in and cur-dog leavings for food!"

Villard looked like a throw-back to some early twentieth-century soap-box orator, standing there against the wall with his black hair loose and his arms gesturing wildly. His pale, blood-streaked face was hollow cheeked, and there was a lean, hungry look in his deep-set eyes.

"We won't take any of their guff this time," Eric snapped. "They'll agree—or we strike!"

"Strike!" Taney gasped. The sound of the word stopped all action in the room. The rescue squad glanced up, fully attentive to a conversation they had only half listened to a moment before. Not in the ninety-five year life of Sparta City or her sister cities had the Spartans struck.

Time was when they hadn't needed to. They had lived in gleaming white cities where everything was done for their comfort and safety. The pioneers of Sparta knew the dangers of atomic power and guarded against accidents. Their sons and their sons' sons drifted farther away from the original plan of the cities — specialized settlements in which artisans were born to the work. Increased dividends was the prize that lured them from the expense of keeping up the city and replacing worn equipment. Today, Sparta was a ramshackle, smoke-blackened slum where clanking machinery clattered day and night.

VILLARD straightened from the wall, eyes glittering. "Why waste time with an ultimatum? We could bust this city wide open in an hour! Sabotage the turbines and dump the U-235 stores in the river. They haven't an engineer in their fathead organization who could put it back together. We'd have 'em on their knees!"

Eric shook his head. "That's a dangerous precedent to set. If the other cities struck, the country would be paralyzed. Subversive groups could take over in a week."

"What's more subversive than rule by Sparta?" Villard demanded.

"Any 'ism' you can name. It isn't the system that's wrong. The rest of the nation is healthy enough. But Sparta's got to be tamed."

Villard's lips loosened in a scornful half-smile. "If I'm any prophet, Kayser's looking at the White House. He could damned well buy his way in. But I've got me a bunch of boys—more than you think!—that'd see this cesspool blown inside out before he ever saw Washington. In sixty minutes, we could stop every plant!"

Taney offered a belligerent chin. "Any time you try to sabotage my plant —! Orders'll have to start higher than a two-bit inspection boss before I turn over my keys."

Clay Villard had an ugly answer in his eyes, but Eric cut him off.

"You may get your chance, yet. I hope not. Fill out your report and we'll go across the river. Taney, you come along. We'll give them the facts. Then, if we have to—we'll give 'em hell!"

Upstairs, Inspector Borch was impatiently waiting for Eric. His soft fea-

tures were flushed.

"Terrible thing, Balt! I hope the proper precautions had been taken—?"

"By us—yes. The leak was in your office. We asked for compressors and you sent us a pink memo."

Borch looked bewildered. "But—but routine, you know!" His pudgy hands waved futilely.

"I know. Murderous routine! So we're skipping the usual song-and-dance and giving our report direct to Kayser this time."

The New York representative stood stiffly as the three moved to pass him. "Feeling your authority, aren't you, Balt? Your report will go through the usual channels."

Eric snapped: "Get out of my way."

Borch stood there hunting words, a scowl gathering between his eyes. Eric said again:

"Get out of the way!"

"Don't be a fool! I'll take your report right here—" Borch groped for a pencil.

Eric struck, a soggy-sounding blow that lifted the inspector's chin three inches. Borch landed at the base of the wall.

Rubbing his knuckles, Eric hurried out.

CHAPTER II

Mainspring

THE slim, brown-haired girl stood under the Gothic arch of the big window. New York spread glitteringly many stories beneath, the river a teeming boundary to its activity. Beyond, Sparta City lay a gray smudge on the mainland.

Maureen Sparr heard, with a tingle of excitement, the low, sullen ripple of talk behind her. She was conscious of the director's hostile eyes on her back. She gave no sign that it disturbed her, but in the glass she watched the reflection of eight sullen men slumped around a conference table.

"A woman's got no place here, Maureen! Sparta is a man's organization."

Warren Kayser's square palm came down hard on the table. Maureen could see him sprawled at the table's head, chewing viciously on a pencil eraser.

There was a blue-jowled, ruthless look about the powerful Sparta head that always somehow frightened her. He was tall and solidly built, in a gray business suit, his cheeks shot with thready veins and his dark eyes angry. Physically, he could have crushed her so easily—it gave the girl a sense of triumph to know she had him blocked.

Her face tipped to regard him over her shoulder. "After all, Warren, who owns Sparta; you or I?"

"You, of course! But until you're twenty-one—and that's not for a while yet, young woman—you've got no more say in its operation than an urchin in the streets. I've tripled the value of Sparta stock since your father died. Yet you question—"

"—what? I ask for the privilege of being present at a director's meeting, and you act as though you'd been betrayed. The same document that made you administrator of my father's estate gives me that right. And, gentlemen, I intend to take advantage of it."

Her eyes switched to the man who pushed back his chair and came toward her. Joel Sheridan was lean, brown and blond, the youngest man on the board. In Maureen's set, he was considered a catch. But he was a catch she wished to throw back now, after only two months of being engaged. Sheridan was completely without a sense of humor, coldly efficient even in his love-making.

"Please, dear—must you be stubborn?" Sheridan took her hands. "If Warren doesn't want you in the way, it's because you wouldn't understand things."

"And that's just why I want to be here!" Maureen insisted. "Do you know that I've never seen Sparta City? And yet in six months it will be up to me to run it at a profit. Perhaps, if I had, I'd know why so many accidents happen. At least, I'll get an inkling from Borch's report."

Looks of apprehension flashed about the table. Sheridan dropped the girl's hands. "This is utter foolishness! Do you think we haven't done our best to protect the workmen? Certainly you hear gossip of our cavalierly treatment of them. The lower classes always find an excuse for their stupidity and lack of ambition."

"Nevertheless," Maureen shook her head, "I'm staying. To put it in a language you understand, it means money to me to learn how to manage the corporation. After Warren's administration ends—"

She stopped, her lips parted.

Not hearing the slightest sound, not seeing the flicker of an eyelid. But feeling—*feeling* like an electric jolt the hatred that exuded from the men about the table!

Suddenly terror chilled the girl so that she trembled.

The realization came brutally vivid that Warren Kayser had never intended to give up his control of Sparta. Without it, what would he be? A run-of-the-mine lawyer. Power was a narcotic that he could not give up. She knew that from her knowledge of the man. If murder was the price he must pay for it, he would pay it.

"You were saying—?" Kayser was leaning on his elbows, his fingers linked, smiling faintly.

Maureen fought to quell the sick fear that nauseated her.

A walnut box on the table made a burring sound. Kayser snapped a switch.

"Some gentlemen from Mr. Borch, Mr. Kayser."

An edge of worry shaded the secretary's voice. Kayser frowned. His wide nostrils drew a deep breath as he stared wrathfully at Maureen.

"Send 'em in!"

THERE was a cold grimness to the plant men as they entered, a look of having been steeped in coal-fumes and oil. A lean toughness in the way they carried their coveralled bodies, that spoke of hard jobs sweated through, of lost sleep, of danger. And there was the gray hatred in their strange cat's eyes, the color of old ice.

Villard still bore the stains of near-tragedy. Blood scabbed his face from a deep slash, and red stains were over his olive uniform. There were feverish glints in his sunken eyes.

Kayser bounced to his feet. "Has Borch lost his mind?" he roared.

"Temporarily — yes," Eric smiled grimly. "It seems our last few reports have been strangled in red tape. We've brought this one in person."

Joel Sheridan left Maureen's side to stalk up to Eric. His long, tanned jaw jutted.

"You'll make your report in the usual way," he snapped. "Get out!"

Eric looked down at him. There was deception in the way his wide shoulders and slim hips cut inches off his actual height.

"Those were Borch's exact words," he said, "before I broke his jaw. You'll go stand by the lady again, or I'll break yours, too."

Sheridan's eyes duelled with the Spartan's. He snorted contemptuously.

But he backed up.

Eric's eyes filled with contempt as he looked about the table.

"Seventeen months! Five explosions! One hundred men killed! Forty-five mutilated! And now another accident, and at least twenty more dead."

The frozen half-smile lay on Kayser's lips. "Regrettable occurrences, to be sure. Do you imply that I could have prevented them?"

Superintendent Taney struck folded papers against his palm. "Here's a carbon of my requisition of four months ago, asking for new compressors for the latest plant that broke down!"

Maureen Sparr caught her breath. "You mean—it was known that long ago that the compressors were faulty?"

Eric's eyes swivelled to her. "Lady, the same thing has happened in every accident since I've been maintenance boss. New ray-shields, new concentrate bins, new gauges—we asked for them and never got them."

The girl's eyes flashed to Warren Kayser's face. Kayser spoke hurriedly to Eric, his cheeks coloring.

"Accidents are always unfortunate. But what would you suggest? Complete new plants? Good Lord, man, we can't fill every order without assuring ourselves the parts are needed."

"New plants are exactly what we need. I think you know that. The old Sparrs built the city like a precision chronometer; but the clock is running down. Apparently you figure that if you've got to expend a fortune anyway, better to wait until a plant breaks down completely. Lost lives cost you nothing."

He halted, his eyes searching through the slack faces. "From this morning on, that system is finished."

"FINISHED?" Warren Kayser balanced a pencil delicately between thumb and forefinger, his eyes veiled.

Eric said coldly: "These are the things we want: Tripled wages. Slum clearance. New plants and modern safety measures. We want them, and by God, we'll have them!"

Out of the instant's horrified silence boiled a cannonade of angry voices. Townsend, Chief Purchasing Agent, was on his feet, hammering the table.

"A hundred million dollars wouldn't rebuild the plants!" he shouted.

"Say two hundred millions for the whole job," Villard rasped. "Sparta made a profit of a half-billion last year. . . ."

"But that was on all five of the plant cities—!" Sheridan cried.

"All right!" Villard snapped. "With two years' profits the whole system could be replaced. And you'd get used to the matter of increased wages."

Warren Kayser let the hubbub calm before he tapped his pencil for silence.

"The demands, of course, are absurd," he shrugged. "The only question is—what are you going to do now that we refuse?"

"Strike!" Eric said crisply. "You have three days to accede to our demands. If you refuse, the plants shut down. The Eastern United States won't have a kilowatt of power until you agree."

The steel certainty of their strength was in the Spartans' faces. Doubt clouded the directors' eyes. They glanced at Warren Kayser. Some mete of worry must have passed over his mind. But in his face there was only cold hatred.

"This is our ultimatum to you, Spartans. The first moment our power lines go dead, the State militia will march into Sparta City and cut you down like hogs. You'll go back to work or be butchered to the last man. Do you want that?"

"Do you want cities without light and heat? Without elevators, radios, sanitary plants? Without power to cook your food?"

Kayser shrugged. "Apparently, we've reached an impasse," he said smilingly.

"But we haven't!" Maureen Sparr stamped her foot. "I can see why you didn't want me at the meetings. So this is how you've tripled our profits! I want you men to know that although I own Sparta, I've had nothing to say about how it was run. From today I intend to. Warren, we're going to accept their conditions!"

"Keep out of this, you little fool!" Joel Sheridan snarled.

"Fortunately," Kayser cut in drily, "it isn't up to Miss Sparr to say yes or no in anything concerning Sparta, Inc. The interview is closed, gentlemen—"

Maureen's eyes flashed. "Do you think so, Warren? It's true I can't legally force you, but I can coerce. The papers would go wild with what I've heard this morning. They could ruin those carefully-nurtured hopes of yours towards the presidential nomination. They'd love it! Don't you want to reconsider?"

The conversation froze. Warren Kayser was for once without words. Maureen stood haughtily with her chin up and tiny flames dancing in her eyes.

There was a laugh in Eric Balt's voice as he stirred. "I can see you have things to discuss privately. You know where to find us when you come to an agreement. Good day, gentlemen. And thanks, Miss Sparr!"

CHAPTER III

Quarry

MAUREEN was to regret her threat. Warren Kayser said not a word to her after the Spartans left. He marshalled the directors from the room, and silence came to fill the lofty walnut-panelled chambers.

For an hour Maureen was alone in the council room. There was a cold, fluttering terror in her breast. She had found the door locked. There was no one to hear her pounding. Bitterly, now, she regretted taking part in the argument. Better to have kept still and gone secretly to Eric Balt.

The thought sent her swiftly to the window. Where in that vast smoke-world could she find him? Or, if she knew where to look—how to get out of the building?

Within her, the certainty mounted that Warren Kayser intended to make his administration of Sparta a permanent one—today!

Again she tried the doors, but the pounding beat hollowly back through the suite. She thought of the fire-escape. But there was no access to it from the windows of this room. Or—was there!

She cranked the steel sash out and leaned forward. The iron stairway passed only eight feet beneath.

Maureen caught up her courage in a quick breath. She slipped across and for a deadly moment was hanging by her fingertips from the rough gray cement. The landing smashed against her ankles with aching force. A moment she crouched, feeling the frightened tempo of her heart.

Then she was scurrying on awkwardly high-heeled slippers down forty-five stories of black slatted stairs.

Dusk was a rust-gray strata in the west when she crossed the bridge. A knot of river idlers ran bold searching eyes over her as she hurried into the slatternly, dark streets.

She was abruptly conscious of how foreign she must appear to the Spartans' eyes. Her close-fitted blue velvet-

een dress, and matching slippers made her a moving flash of color in the drab streets. Hastily she turned inward the three-carat baguette solitaire Joel Sheridan had given her. There was no way to hide the heavy bracelet and brooch she wore.

When she had hurried along four or five blocks, she discovered the men of the bridge behind her. Panic caught her coldly. She swerved to a fat old granny smoking a cigarette in a doorway.

"I'm looking for Eric Balt!" The words came out in a rush. "Can—can you tell me—"

The woman's evil old eyes were on Maureen's bracelet. "Straight ahead, dearie!" she cackled.

The sheer lasciviousness of her grin drove Maureen on with feet that wanted to run.

Deeper and deeper into the city, past tenements that stunk with decay, and crib-like doorways where slovenly women cried out at her. Maureen would have turned back, but now she was hopelessly lost. She felt the catch break on her bracelet as a lanky, red-headed woman snatched at it. Instantly there was a shriek from the woman's companion.

"*Diamonds!* Stop her!"

"She's mine! I saw her first!"

THAT from the red-headed one. Maureen fled without looking back.

Darkness was puddling in the streets. It made running difficult for her, but for the Spartans' eyes daylight would hold forever. There was the heavy thud of men's feet in the bedlam of women's shrill screaming.

The girl flung around a corner, paused to slip off her high-heeled shoes and run on barefooted. Numberless times she fell. The sidewalks were slimy with filth. Her dress was a rag, her knees bled and her palms were pitted with gravel where she had fallen.

Sobbing, she zig-zagged down alleys, up narrow streets. The profane howling of the pack was a hundred feet behind. Her bleeding feet were slowing.

A tenement doorway loomed, and the girl darted into it. Down the worn carpet and out again into a yard. A jungle of ash barrels, boxes and junk. Maureen's terrified eyes searched for a door in the crumbling fence. She failed to find one, but after a moment her eyes stopped on something better. . . .

Flowing like water into every room and cranny, the mob poured through the tenement house. When they began to straggle out the back, the girl was not in sight. Boxes and cans were upturned by snarling searchers.

Maureen was faint with relief when, through the tiny basement window beneath which she crouched, she saw them leave. She struggled for clearness of thought. She dared not leave. Nor could she stay here forever. She came at last to a bitter decision. Tomorrow, when it was light, she would try to find Eric Balt again.

A night in this rat-infested cesspool!

The ragged burning of her nerves gradually soothed. The hours brought increasing calmness. Shortly after midnight she fell asleep.

ERIC'S quarters adjoined the maintenance warehouse on the south side of one of Sparta's less decrepit avenues. His grilled window gave on a dismal industrial thoroughfare. From his bed, on sleepless nights, he could look out into a stark canyon of shadow-caves and vague smears of light.

Eric slept light. His head snapped from the pillow when the imperative knock sounded on the door that night. A mutter of angry voices filtered from the street.

The cold air, the jarring contact of cold cement with his bare feet, sharpened his perception. He pulled on pants and a shirt, dug into slippers, and moved to the door. The voices, now, he catalogued as those of Clay Villard and Taney.

Taney held a revolver buried to the front-sight in the black-haired inspection boss' spine.

"Get in there, you flash-in-the-pan parlor pink!" he snarled.

Villard was a tempest in chains. Inside the room, he whirled. In the light's full flare, Eric saw the swelling under his eye.

"By God, Taney, this will cost you something!" The words crowded past his clenched teeth. The cords of his neck stood out.

"Taney! What's up?" Eric stood touseled, frowning at the gun.

"This — this — bolshevik, boss!" Taney's unshaven face screwed up with contempt. "Plottin' to wreck the city. Him and his red-belted feists!"

Staring at the red leather belt encircling Villard's spare midriff, Eric came under increased bewilderment. "Once again, and slowly."

Taney gulped a chest-full of air. "I saw him and some of them no-good slag muckers bumming around the old wharves about nine o'clock. They were up to some mischief; I seen that. At ten o'clock they slunk into an old warehouse. I followed 'em. Gawd! The place was full of bums wearing these red belts! Five thousand, anyway. They got down and crawled like damn' snakes when Villard stepped up on the soap box."

Villard growled: "Somebody else is going to crawl before this is finished."

Taney rocked the gun as if fighting a restless trigger finger. His undershot jaw became grimmer as he went on.

"You should've heard him spiel! Like something out of a pipe-dream. They're going to lead us to power, him and his red-belts. *'America for Spartans! The men who run the plants run the nation!'* If I heard that once, I heard it a hundred times. They're going to sabotage Sparta City, raise general hell in New York every night. The New Yorkers will be helpless in the dark. In a few days, things will be ripe for them to move on to the Chicago plant and organize the workers." Taney snorted. "I caught 'im as he was going home."

Fury came rioting up through Eric, so that his fists knotted and he rocked toward Villard. "I credited you with better sense!" he ground out. "You see yourself leading an army of Spartans to power, but you can't see any farther than that. The futility and certain defeat of such a move!"

Villard's pale eyes, set narrowly at the sides of his thick-bridged nose, snapped. "Where do you get this loyalty to the hand that strangles us? Are you blind? They've got our faces ground into the mud, and we won't get out of it until we get up by our own power. We've got the strength to go as high as we want. We can rule America!"

"You say that so damned easily!" Eric flung back. " 'We can rule America!' Twenty million workers can't rule a nation as a body. There's got to be a ruling body formed, a small one to carry out the majority's wishes. You can't form such a body in the midst of a revolution. The time—"

"Time enough when we've won."

"There won't be time enough! There'll be anarchy by then. Your red-belts will be only one of many such groups that suddenly merge out of the fire. Every man will be his own dictator. Stealing food when he's hungry . . . having his way of every unprotected woman. . . . It won't work, Villard!"

He brought his voice down by an effort. "Relax for a few days. Give Kayser a chance to grant our demands. He'll have to. After we get our bearings, we'll have twenty million votes to swing reforms our way."

Villard laughed, a harsh, dry rasp in his throat. "Slow and easy, eh? A fifty-year plan. Not for us, mister. We're ready to hit, and we won't be pulling our punches. Take some good advice, Balt. Get on the wagon while you can!"

He was starting for the door, then; to be blocked off by Taney. The keg-shaped superintendent glanced quizzically at Eric, undecided as to the ethics of the moment.

Eric shrugged. "Let him go. What can we do? If we tried to hold him, his crowd would make a martyr of him."

Villard's cocky grin, flashing back from the street, was the gesture of a man holding the strings of fate in his fingers. He was striding off into the darkness when lights played over him from the end of the street, and voices rose commandingly.

CHAPTER IV

Breakdown!

THEY broke from a brisk walk into a run, flashlights bobbling, a squadron of blue-coated police headed by two men in civilian clothing. Villard took a single glance and plunged into an alley. A pistol cracked, and the scream of a slug spanging off a cornice was a slash of sound across the darkness.

The total surprise of the moment kept Eric Balt riveted in the doorway. Taney gaped over his shoulder. To the Spartans' eyes, the scene was daylight-clear. Sawed-off shotguns and gas pistols flashed in the hands of the policemen. A gray ribbon of smoke fluttered from the barrel of the pistol carried by the civilian in the lead. It was Warren Kayser, and at his heels ran Joel Sheridan.

Eric flung back into the room, slammed the door. His lips were tight across his teeth.

"This is it, Taney! The purge! They're trying to stop the strike by removing the leaders."

"I'll take Kayser first. Then Sheridan." Taney's voice was a matter-of-fact growl.

Eric dragged him across the room by the arm. "Save your shells as a last resort. That corner ceiling panel is loose. Climb on the chair and crawl in—

Taney swung up, his body squeezing through the hole with a last-second boost by Eric.

Crawling into the warm, musty darkness, Eric let the door fall back.

"This is my safe deposit vault. Any time I've got a few dollars or a carton of cigarettes I don't want stolen, I stow it up here."

The door slammed open, and in the tautness hard heels jarred on the floor. Quick, ruthless hands slung the furniture about.

"They've slipped out. This rat's nest is empty. Balt and Taney must've left ahead of Villard." That was Warren Kayser speaking brittlely into the sudden quiet.

Excited voices rose simultaneously. "Anderson will get them—" "They can't get through the dragnet—!" "We'll have them by morning, Mister Kayser!"

"Don't fool yourself. Those Spartans know this layout like a ghost knows the catacombs."

Footfalls hastened back to the street. Straining, the listeners barely deciphered the jerky flow of conjecture that oozed through the walls.

Sheridan's voice had a frown: "Maybe they haven't got her. It looks like they'd keep her with them."

"There're holes in this city where they could hide a three-ring circus forever without being discovered. If we don't find Maureen tonight, our goose is on the way to a quick boil. I'm convinced this is a kidnapping for coercion. And yet she may be getting together with them to block us."

"Borch thinks they've already got some kind of secret organization," Sheridan grunted.

"Well, they've damned few guns for their army, that's a cinch," Kayser snorted. "We'll do the best— Good God!"

"What's the matter?"

"New York! Pitch dark! *They've sabotaged the plants!*"

IN the grayness, Eric looked at Taney. Shock had its flabby stamp on the superintendent's features. Down in the street a bridge of horror stretched across the void, and crumbled away as Sheridan yelled, his voice reedy with terror.

"Somebody go back for men! We'll split up and hold them in the plants!"

Weary, disgusted, Warren Kayser's tones harshly overrode him. "Two men to a plant? We wouldn't last five minutes. We'll get out of Sparta City while we can. I've got a notion we'll be lucky to do that!"

Then the voices came no more, and a ragged shuffle of running feet ended in silence. Eric and Taney left the room. From the middle of the deserted street, they could see New York, a range of black crags along the gray horizon, not a spot of light breaking the total darkness.

"Must have been the diversion plant." Eric's long body slumped a little. "All the plants couldn't have failed simultaneously. What power remained would have been re-routed to the city."

"Eric Balt!"

The thin cry brought Eric about in a swift pivot. He stared at the girl standing in the middle of the street a hundred feet away. Then, suddenly, he was striding toward her.

"Girl!" He gripped her by the shoulders and looked down at her. Her dress was ripped, and white skin shone through the rents. Her makeup was gone. Scratches criss-crossed her face. Little remained of an expensive coiffure; little remained to prove this was the girl Eric had been so strongly attracted to in Kayser's office that morning.

"I tried to find you! They locked me in the council room, and I—I was afraid!"

"Of what?"

"That Kayser would kill me!" The girl was trembling. A surge of pity flowed hotly through Eric. Taney came running up. The sordid, vicious story of greed that Maureen gasped out brought revengeful noises from Taney's barrel chest, kindled sparks in the glacial blue of Eric Balt's eyes.

"I wanted to reach you. But I knew as soon as I left the bridge, it was a mistake to try. I hid until I saw the searching party go by. Then I followed. I wouldn't have believed anyone could be so—so vile as those women!"

Eric's smile was bitter. "You saw our town the hard way. You went through the Bowery and the red light district, I'm afraid. Most Spartans are as normal as you could expect."

He took her arm to help her to the room. Maureen came close against him, feeling in his lean strength a warm sense of security.

"Boss, we're wastin' time!" Taney fidgeted. "We can save ourselves a month of repair work if we knock Vil-

lard over before he runs hog-wild through the whole plant. Put the girl in the attic and—"

Eric nodded, but Maureen drew back. "You'll take me with you!"

"Haven't you had enough of Sparta's night-life?" Eric smiled bleakly.

Maureen's head shook. "If I can talk to Villard, perhaps I can convince him that there's a better way—a legal, safe way—to defeat Kayser—!"

"He's a brick wall where reason is concerned. You'll be safer here."

Again she shook her head, and drawing a few steps down the street, smiled back tantalizingly. "Coming along? I think Taney said we should hurry—"

Eric shrugged and followed. They worked swiftly to the center of the city, through dismal alleys and rotting tenement districts. Eric's gaze cut through every black alley-mouth and doorway. Villard's red-belts would likely be on the prowl. But they came into the square that set off the diversion plant before they tangled with them.

In the very air about the structure, power whispered and crackled, power that fed a thousand cities, large and small. Ominous, grim, the plant rose skeletally from the barren ground of the square. The fluted tower of blackened masonry stabbed uneven pinnacles into the belly of low-hanging fog and smoke-clouds.

From the square-piled marble flanking the entrance, a cordon of burly slag-muckers loomed like gray watchdogs. Meshing swiftly, they cut off Eric's advance. He searched for guns and saw none, although crowbars and wrenches were everywhere. They made no attempt to break past the guards.

Standing back, he shouted: "Villard!"

AN answer whined down from the fourth level of the tower. Rifle-lead splattered on the cement about their feet. Maureen cried out sharply. Eric gripped her hand. He had a worried instant of fearing that Taney might attempt to return the fire. But the plant boss stood stolidly, arms crossed, conscious of the futility of matching a pistol with rifle-fire.

The guards roared with laughter. When they were quiet, Villard's gloating shout came. "I should have put it through that fat slob of a straw-boss! Ready to join up now, Balt?"

"Not while I've got my sanity," Eric retorted. "I came here to break your neck if I could get at you. So you've started, have you? What do you figure on using as weapons for your army?"

"I've got the only weapon I need," Villard countered. "Watch!"

Somewhere behind dark windows a relay crashed. High in the tower, blue and green flame licked across a gap. Then a blaze of light, visible through a notch in the buildings, sent their glances across the river.

A hundred thousand neon tubes burst into glory. Up the sides of dark skyscrapers zig-zagged strings of glittering jewels. A river of white light gushed down Broadway. Traffic signals flashed red, green and gold. Above the city, misty spokes accelerated as beacons began to turn.

Then, without warning, it was over.

Along the river, interlaced power-lines became scarlet cobwebs, heated to the softness of lead by a teriffic overload. A mililon fuses blew suddenly out. New York City relapsed into the horror of complete darkness.

The dull nervelessness of despair weighed upon Eric Balt. Nor had Maureen the spirit to make her plea.

Villard himself seemed overcome by the spectacle. For seconds he held his silence. When he spoke, it was with the timbre of elation in his voice.

"I like that better than guns. But I've got a proposition to make Kayser, and I'm sending for him tomorrow. You'll be here too.. Come at noon—and come without guns."

CHAPTER V

Madman's Truce

SUNLIGHT dissolved early morning mist over the cities. It was Autumn, and the night's chill clung damply to unheated buildings. Mobs stirred sluggishly in New York's streets, bewildered, frightened.

Maureen Sparr slept late. Eric and Taney dozed in turns, one man always guarding the door.

Eric Balt had never had time for romance. Love was a furtive thing in Sparta City, robbed of any importance by the constant drive for work, the sordid seriousness of life. Marriages were convenience; married couples received a dowry and slightly increased wages. It was to the directors' interests to support the failing birth rate.

For Eric, it was something new and breath-taking, the surge of emotions Maureen's nearness awoke in him. Analytically he dissected the reaction. Its complexity baffled him. He knew only that he was grateful for the excuse to stand guard by the foot of her bed, watching the rise and fall of her breasts in sleep, the curl of long lashes upon her cheeks.

Then he remembered that he was a Spartan and she a thrice-wealthy heiress. He was all business when she awoke.

About eleven, the clanking of drawbridges broke through the sullen quiet. Eric leaped for his tiny bedside radio. "Power again!" he jerked.

Static crashed deafeningly. Through it struggled the excited words of a news commentator.

"—where thousands were stalled in elevators for hours! Subway crashes took a score of lives. Fires razed whole buildings, as alarm systems failed and small blazes grew to roaring hells. A liner was badly damaged when a drawbridge failed to raise after signalling 'go ahead'. In other cities, conditions were equally disastrous.

"At three-forty-five a. m. power suddenly came on again with a jolt that burned out millions of fuses. Authorities have commandeered the entire stock of fuses to make replacements at vitally necessary points. Power-men are working at top speed to repair burned wires and transformers. It is hoped that a truce will be reached with the strikers before nightfall. Warren Kayser, president of Sparta, Incorporated, is at my side in response to urgent requests to comment on the present crisis."

Someone cleared his throat, and Kayser's voice come, low and grave:

"I wish I might give to the Eastern United States, this morning, the encouragement it is waiting for. I feel deeply the responsibility that lies with me. By telephone, last night, I spoke with the President. His response to my appeal for aid was to ask me to lay the case before the Labor Board when it convenes next week. I am afraid that in a week the crisis will have passed—one way or another.

"Hence I have made arrangements today to confer with Clay Villard, leader of the strikers. I can only promise that I will make any sacrifice necessary to restore normalcy—even though it means granting the stringent demands of the Spartans. . . ."

Maureen snapped the radio off. "Liar! Charlatan!" Tears of anger swam in her eyes. "He's making his play now for the nation's backing. If he and Villard do get together, nothing

can stop him." She turned helplessly to Eric. "What can we do?"

Eric glanced at the clock. "Nothing, until twelve. Maybe not then. But we won't be missing any plays."

TWELVE o'clock . . . zero hour for America.

Warren Kayser was on time. Standing near the door of the tower, Eric, Taney, and Maureen saw the big black limousine come swiftly through the streets to stop on the square. Kayser got out, Joel Sheridan striding around from the driver's seat. They came up the walk, two wide-shouldered, dogged figures.

Kayser passed the Spartan group without looking at them. His face was gray and hard. The others followed them inside.

In the lobby, a dozen red-belted workmen, armed variously with guns and tools, merged to flank them like a miiltary escort. In this fashion they were taken to the big central conversion room. Villard was alone there, an almost flimsy figure on the brass-railed mezzanine that crossed the far end of the room. Banks of relays, switches, a huge board of winking colored lights, loomed beside him. Below, a vast sea of pulsating machinery: Tubes that surged with inner flame; mighty coils of shining copper; crouching black masses of transformers.

He turned swiftly at their approach, a brittle grin possessing his mouth. A rifle came to his hand, and he caught it loosely in the crook of his elbow.

"Not a bad talk this morning, Kayser," he said seriously. "Not bad at all."

"I can't say I intended to glorify you any, my friend," Kayser snapped.

"But you certainly glorified yourself! And at present that's good enough."

The feeling was strong in Eric that neither his group nor Kayser's was ever intended to leave this place. He had come with that suspicion. And yet he had come knowing the futility of dodging danger this late in the game.

"Well, master-mind, what's the deal?" he bit out.

Villard looked at him thoughtfully. "Your part won't be hard to play. You're here simply because I don't want you running around spilling your brand of loose talk. I had to have the girl because she'd be in the way later on. Don't look so sour, Taney; I've got plans for you, too."

Sheridan was looking at Maureen. He tried to come close to her, but she immediately placed herself so that Eric was between them. Coloring, Sheridan snapped his eyes to Villard.

"Let's get at it. What's your proposition?"

Villard now stood among the burly guardsmen. At his hand were the switches that could paralyze New York City in one flashing second.

"Kayser, you talked a lot of common-sense yesterday," he said frankly. "It's a fact you could make me plenty of trouble. It's also true what Balt said—unless I keep tight hold on the reins, the wagon's going to get away from me. Well, I'm not greedy. I'm willing to cut you in on the deal."

Surprise flared briefly in Kayser's eyes, and was gone. "You're smart," he grunted. "I've taken steps to blast Sparta City off the map the next time the power goes off."

Villard said levelly: "It's going off tonight, but you aren't going to drop a lousy bomb. You're going to sit in your office rubbing your hands over the fun you and I are having!"

Before twenty-five words had been spoken, Eric Balt had sized the situation up. Through slate-cold eyes, he

watched the play now, hearing the lines spoken as he had foreseen them.

Villard smiled. "That speech of yours gave me the idea. You're in a position to make a sort of god out of yourself . . . with my cooperation. You slung plenty of mud on the President today, and you can do a lot better. I'm going to pull this switch in a minute, and it will stay out for two or three days. New York will be in a hell of a shape by then. They'll be begging the President to help them, and he's bound to fail. Nothing he can do."

"And then Kayser, the fair-haired boy, steps in!" That was Eric's deep, rasping voice. "At tremendous risk to himself, he pulls the people's chestnuts out of the fire. He gives them power again. Tells them he's finally at liberty to speak the truth. Maureen Sparr, the real boss of Sparta, is the one responsible for the degrading condition of Sparta City! But Boss Kayser has bucked her strong-arm methods and taken over the company, giving the Spartan laborers all they asked."

During Eric's angry flare-up, Clay Villard had watched him unemotionally. "Right! And with election less than a year off—"

"What do you want out of it?" Kayser shrewdly knifed in.

He and Sheridan had come to stand close to the blade-thatched leader. Behind the red-belts loomed the low guard-rail. Eric's jaw was set in sharp angles.

"Not the President's chair, anyway. As you say, I'm not suited for the job. Besides, it's bad on the digestion. But you'll need a labor boss. The salary will no doubt be considerably more than I'm getting here."

"No doubt!"

Kayser's chuckle ended as Maureen said in a choked voice: "You're trading thousands of human lives for power! You know what it will mean to leave these cities without electricity. Hospitals shut down . . . more subway deaths . . . Riots!"

"The case, after all," Kayser clipped, "is one of Hobson's choice. Frankly, the end in view is not repellent to me. The means alone is different."

His eyes went from her to Eric. From Eric to Taney. Then he smiled thinly. "You see where this leaves you, Maureen. And Balt—"

Eric put his arm about the girl as she pressed tremblingly against him.

"You wouldn't forget old Taney, would you?" the superintendent of Plant Eighteen said abruptly.

Eric, a little surprised by his asumed tone, glanced at him. And glanced again, his attention captured by the blaze in Taney's eyes. What he read set to thrumming every nerve in his body.

The rifle slid into Villard's grasp. "No, indeed! As a matter of fact—" A shell slipped greasily into the chamber. But the barrel of the weapon had not lifted two inches when Eric Balt leaped!

LOUD and sharp over the throaty purr of power equipment rang the crack of the rifle. Lead whipped Eric's shirt, and then he was crashing against Villard. His powerful leg-drive slammed the Spartan against the guard rail.

The flush of fury sucked from Villard's cheeks and left them gray-yellow with terror. Desperately his heels rapped against the slippery metal floor, digging for purchase. Eric felt the pincer-like grasp of fingers in his shirt, and he struck viciously at Villard's forearm.

A hand flashed above Eric's head. Kayser reached to grab Villard's gun. In the next moment the lanky, red-belted figure levered over the brass rail-

ing and soared out above the floor. His scream tore raggedly through the tumbling echoes of the rifle-shot. Spread-eagled, he landed in a bank of giant vacuum tubes. Flame licked over him. Smoke sputtered from his seared flesh, and Eric Balt turned sick.

Joel Sheridan had leaped clear of Villard. From his coat pocket he jerked the fat, black automatic he had brought in defiance of Villard's orders. Taney was ready. His own revolver jumped. Two screaming shots blasted into the man's chest, shots that drove Sheridan against the rail, where he slowly twisted to the floor.

The short hairs on Eric's neck prickled as he awaited a barrage of shots from Villard's guardsmen. His back was to them, a wide-open target. Yet his charge did not slow as he rushed Warren Kayser. The rifle was coming up to meet Taney's revolver fire.

Pale flame spewed close to Eric's face. His forearm jarred the rifle out of line, even as he pistoned a short, hard punch to Kayser's stomach. But there was a queerness to the way the blow landed. Kayser's muscles made no defensive stiffening. He sagged limply against the Spartan. Warm blood sopped through his shirt front, and the moist feel of it against Eric's skin told him that Taney had shot first.

And still there was no crashing reverberation of gunfire from the Spartans. Eric grabbed at the fallen rifle as he came about. The guardsmen hung back, confused. Guns and weapons dangled from unwilling fingers. One of them said hastily:

"We—we don't want no trouble, Mister Balt!"

"It was Villard's idea," another cut in. "But he never told us we'd be getting in for trouble. We don't want a revolution. Just—good grub and good wages."

Maureen's voice had a breathless quality to it. She was pale, shaken. "You'll get those things, and more," she promised. "Everything you need to make this city the way it was intended. And soon as you can elect a leader, I'll work with him to frame a plan the majority will like."

Taney glared at the ex-rebels. "I guess we won't need an election. Eh, boys?"

"No, sir!" Grins brushed hard-jawed faces, and the men looked at Eric.

Eric masked his embarrassment with a scowl. "It'll be done in the customary way," he grunted. "Meantime, there's cleaning up to do. I'll take Miss Sparr back."

Outside, Maureen said: "You'd better plan on staying a while. You'll need time to study the company before you take over the management of it."

For that, Eric had only a look of complete shock.

The girl was sliding a big solitaire off her finger, then.

"Joel's," she murmured. "He was going to run Sparta for me after we were married. Kayser was right: it is a man's company. So I think it would be nice if—if you could take his place . . ."

Even Eric knew enough about women to understand that. Spartan or not, there was nothing clumsy about the way he took her in his arms, while Taney and the slag-muckers grinned down from the windows above!

THE END

COMING NEXT MONTH

"AFTER AN AGE"

BY EANDO BINDER

BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL

SCIENCE
FINDS SOMETHING NEW
UNDER THE SUN

INSECT KILLER

THE Leray Corporation has perfected a new infra-red lamp that will destroy insects hiding in cloth, wood, seed, and also, insect pests that are found on dogs, cats, and birds. The ray is claimed to destroy fungus on plant life.

To destroy vermin on your dog or other pet, hold the Leray lamp, which resembles a hand-operated sun lamp, near the dog's body and move your other hand through his fur, so that the lamp's rays can reach the skin. The vermin, when subjected to the ray are destroyed within one to five seconds.

This lamp can also be used to clean the living quarters of your dog. Now, Fido can trade in his Saturday night bath for the latest model of the Leray lamp.

BLOOD SAVER

A BOON to medical science is in sight if experiments to stop excessive bleeding prove as successful on humans as it did on animals.

Experiments on animals were conducted by Dr. W. H. Seegers, Dr. E. D. Wainer, Dr. K. M. Bunkhous, and H. P. Smith, of Iowa State University. These scientists have succeeded in producing thrombin which is purer and has greater blood-clotting properties than any thrombin ever produced before. The blood-clotting properties of thrombin which is produced by chemically treating blood and beef lung, has been known to scientists for a number of years, but it was not used to stop bleeding because it was not sufficiently germ-free.

The Iowa scientists claim their thrombin can be sprayed on the bleeding surfaces of tissues in a surgical operation without any poisonous effects. The thrombin causes a film of blood to form over the bleeding tissues and this action effectively stops the flow from the smaller blood vessels.

They found that thrombin sprayed on an animal's bleeding wound caused the bleeding to stop in less than five seconds. The normal time taken for blood to clot is from two to five minutes, but a thrombin solution can force the blood to clot in two seconds.

Since thrombin can stop bone bleeding within five to ten seconds, it will prove of inestimable value to the surgeon when operating on bones and the brain where excessive bleeding is one of the greatest hindrances. And, of course, war uses of thrombin will be limitless—saving the lives of men injured in battle who would have died from loss of blood during surgery or while waiting for treatment.

TO MEND BROKEN BONES

DR. EDWARD L. COMPERE, of Chicago, a short time ago described his experience with patients and the results of his experiments on rats that showed it was unwise to give a patient suffering with broken bones any calcium or vitamin D in addition to that which they obtained from their regular diet while under the doctor's care.

In holding this view, Dr. Compere is at direct odds with most doctors who have prescribed extra doses of vitamin D and of calcium salts for their patients with broken bones—because both are known essentials for bone formation. Dr. Compere said that instead of causing the bones to knit faster, the old-fashioned method may hinder or even prevent the bones from mending. In his experiments with rats, he found that the broken legs mended faster when their diet contained only a very small amount of added vitamin D.

If the rats were given large amounts of vitamin D and/or calcium, their broken bones did not mend so well. Not only did the additional calcium and vitamin D slow down the healing, but they also caused the center of the callus, forming at the ends of the broken bones, to die off in some cases.

When Dr. Compere examined a patient that had been given huge doses of vitamin D to hasten the healing of her broken hand, he found that instead of aiding her, the patient had osteomalacia, a dangerous bone disease.

Basing his statement on his rat experiments, Dr Compere even went so far as to say that it was better to give the patient a diet containing too little calcium than it was to supplement the patient's normal diet with additional vitamin D or calcium doses.

The only time Dr. Compere recommends additional vitamin D or calcium for a patient with broken bones is in the case of babies. The reason for this is that babies need vitamin D and calcium to prevent rickets—whether they have a broken bone or not. In all other cases, the patient gets all the necessary vitamin D and calcium from their normal diet prescribed by the doctor.

by PAIGE WHITNEY

Somebody once said there was nothing new under the sun; but here are a few new ones that scientists have sprung on us lately!

VITAMIN A FROM COCKROACHES

DOCTORS have always believed that Vitamin A in some form was an absolute necessity in the diet of all forms of animal life. However, Dr. C. M. McCay of Cornell University, has conducted experiments which prove that the humble little cockroach is entirely free from the vitamin A "monopoly."

An entire colony of cockroaches was put on a diet that contained not one trace of vitamin A. Instead of getting sick and dying the way they were supposed to, the cockroaches lived a normal life and continued to multiply just as rapidly as usual. Dr. McCay thought that perhaps the cockroach possessed some means of producing their vitamin A requirements in their bodies and so he made an extract from their bodies which he fed to some rats that he had on a diet containing no vitamin A. Even with the cockroach extract, the rats still developed all the signs of being deficient in vitamin A.

The only possible conclusion that Dr. McCay could glean from this experiment was that the cockroach in some manner was able to thrive without any vitamin A whatsoever.

TO BE OPENED 8113 A. D.

DR. JACOBS, president of Oglethorpe University, members of the faculty and various state officials decided a few years ago to leave some tangible evidence of our scientific progress and civilization for people over 60 centuries in the future to gaze upon. This is comparable to the Egyption hieroglyfics that far-sighted scientists thousands of years ago may have left purposely for us to read and thus learn something of their civilization.

These comprehensive records are all sealed in stainless steel containers and stored in a giant crypt. A stainless steel plaque was placed on the door and tells of the contents of the crypt as follows:

"The crypt contains memorials of the civilization which existed in the United States and in the world at large during the first half of the twentieth century. In receptacles of stainless steel, in which the air has been replaced by inert gasses, are encyclopedias, histories, scientific works, special editions of newspapers, travelogues, travel talks, cinema reels, models, phonograph records and similar materials from which an adequate idea of the state and nature of the civilization of 1900 to 1950 can be ascertained. No jewels or precious metals are included.

"We depend upon the laws of the County of De Kalb, the State of Georgia, and the Government of the United States, and of their heirs, assigns, and successors, and upon the sense of sportsmanship of posterity for the continued preservation of this vault until the year 8113 at which time we direct that it shall be opened by authorities representing the above governmental agencies and the administration of Oglethorpe University. Until that time, we beg of all persons that this sealed door and the contents of the crypt within may remain inviolate."

SWEET? SCIENCE SAYS "MAYBE"

PEOPLE often believe that the same substance will always be sweet or always taste bitter. This, however, is not true according to Dr. Harold Tangl of the University of Budapest. His observations show that if you rub your tongue with ice, your taste buds will not function properly and you will not be able to distinguish bitter from sweet.

If you apply heat to your tongue, your taste buds are stimulated and you become more conscious of things you are eating. Thus, you require less sugar to sweeten hot coffee than iced coffee.

Man has over 3,000 taste buds located on his tongue which divides everything he eats into sweet, salty, bitter and sour tastes. As a baby, man tastes with the middle of his tongue, but as he grows into an adult, he uses the sides of his tongue to decide whether or not he likes what he is eating.

There are many people who have trained their tastes to such a high degree that they become professional tasters. They find work as tea tasters to determine the quality of a batch of tea. They never have to drink the tea to determine its quality, only take it in their mouth, give their taste buds a chance to act, and then spit the tea out. Expert wine tasters can tell by tasting the wine, the locality in which the grapes were grown, the type of grapes used, and whether the grapes grew in a sunny or shady field.

MR. BIGGS

by NELSON S. BOND

ONE thing is certain. When bigger and better shirts are made, the officials of the Corporation which underpays us will stuff 'em.

We were squatting in a cradle on Earth, waiting for flight orders, when the control turret door swung open and in marched two owl-eyed zombies dressed in frowns and white mess jackets. One of these looked at us, then at a slip of paper. He said, "Donovan, Herbert J.?"

"Present," I said, "but not accountable for. Otherwise known as 'Sparks.' What's the matter, Satyr? Who found out what about me?"

"Come," ordered the stranger curtly, "with me!" And he jerked a thumb in the general direction of the doorway.

Cap Hanson—he's the skipper of our space-shuttling freighter, the *Saturn*—bridled like a mick at an Orangeman's Ball. If there's one thing he cannot tolerate, it is hearing anyone else issue orders on his bridge. His brows congealed into fur-line cumulus clouds.

"And what," he demanded, "is the meaning of this, if I may ask, gentlemen?"

The other whiteclad studied him briefly.

"Hanson?" he queried. "Captain Waldemar V.?"

"That is my name, sir. And why—?"

"Come with me," said the second spectre, and diddled his digit like my accoster.

I said, "Not so fast, kiddies. Last

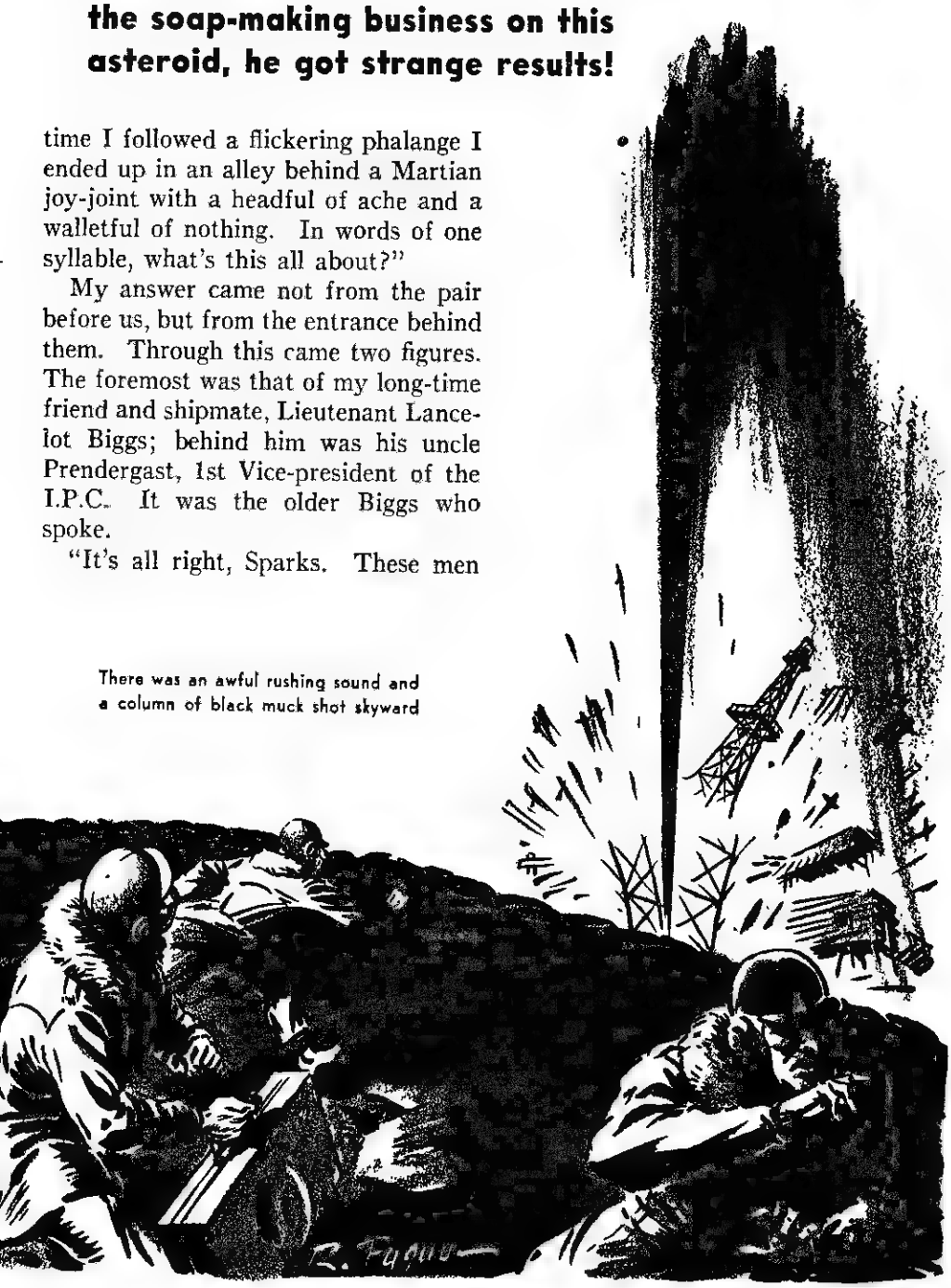
GOES TO TOWN . . .

When Lancelot Biggs started in the soap-making business on this asteroid, he got strange results!

time I followed a flickering phalange I ended up in an alley behind a Martian joy-joint with a headful of ache and a walletful of nothing. In words of one syllable, what's this all about?"

My answer came not from the pair before us, but from the entrance behind them. Through this came two figures. The foremost was that of my long-time friend and shipmate, Lieutenant Lancelot Biggs; behind him was his uncle Prendergast, 1st Vice-president of the I.P.C. It was the older Biggs who spoke.

"It's all right, Sparks. These men



There was an awful rushing sound and a column of black muck shot skyward

are acting under company orders. They are medical officers assigned to give a physical examination to every man aboard the *Saturn*."

"Every man?" choked Cap Hanson. "Did you say *every* man, sir?"

I knew what he was thinking, and I felt a swift pang of compassion for the old boy. Hanson was one of the finest skippers who ever paced a quarterdeck. He had forgotten more space-lore than most men ever learn. But he wasn't as young as he used to be; not by about fifty odd years. Although Cap *looked* hale and hearty, his joints were beginning to stiffen like a mud-pie on Mercury, and sometimes, if you stood beside him in a quiet room, you could hear the dim clank and clatter of his arteries hardening. A physical examination might mean an end to his long career, exile from active service to the waffletail job he had long dreaded.

BUT old P. B. who, being an Earthlubber, didn't know what grounding means to a true spaceman, just smiled.

"That's right, Captain. Every member of the command and crew is being examined. You see, the company is removing the *Saturn* from the freighter service—"

Removing! That was Jolt No. 2! Words got as far as my tonsils—and clogged there. But Biggs' uncle continued blandly:

"—and because of its magnificent service record on behalf of the Corporation, your ship is being assigned to new duties. Henceforth, the *Saturn* will lift gravs only on special tasks, assignments of vital importance which have proven too difficult for ordinary vessels of the fleet."

Well! That was something like! At last our efforts—or should I say the whackypot genius of Lancelot Biggs?—had earned us recognition. My weskit buttons tugged at their moorings; and glancing at my comrades, I saw they shared my pride. Cap Hanson's huge grin threatened to slice off the top of his head, while Lancelot Biggs' sensitive Adam's-apple was galloping up and down in his throat like a runaway yo-yo.

"Well, now!" said Hanson, gratified. "That bein' the case, I can quite understand why physical exams are necessary, sir. But do you feel that *everyone*—?"

"Everyone," nodded the Vice-president, "from highest to lowest. Everyone aboard this ship. Yes, Captain Hanson. Those orders have been issued, and cannot be altered."

Biggs gurgled happily, "Tell them what our first assignment is, Uncle Prenny."

"Ah, yes. Of course, Lancelot. Captain Hanson, you are doubtless cognizant of the—er—delicate situation upon the planetoid Iris?"

"Delicate!" I snorted. Of course Cap knew about it. We all did. It was the top-ranking scandal of the decade. A group of privateers, seeking a base from which to pursue their nefarious exploits, had established themselves upon innocent, helpless little Iris. There, though it was plain to everyone that the diminutive, rodent-like Irisians were being actually held in peonage, the corsairs had set up a puppet government, thereby procuring territorial rights against which the Interplanetary Council could not file demurrer. So:

"Delicate!" I snorted. "That situation smells worse than pole-pussy perfume in a telephone booth! What the Space Patrol ought to do is go in there and grab those rascals—"

"Sparks!" frowned the Old Man. "That will do!" But he turned ques-

tioning eyes to his superior. "Why *doesn't* the Space Patrol do something about it, sir?"

"Because," pointed out Uncle Prenny, "the privateers are—speaking from a purely legal standpoint—quite within their rights. The Patrol cannot move against them because to do so would be to violate the standards of freedom upon which the Interplanetary Union is founded."

"But everybody *knows* they're crooks . . . pirates . . ."

"True. But by glancing back over the pages of man's history you will learn that it is always the crooks who twist law to serve their own evil purposes.

"These privateers moved to Iris, became citizens of that planetoid. Then, by brute force, they seized control of the political machine, voted themselves into governing power. With such power, it was an easy matter to pass laws forbidding exercise of Space Patrol rights of search and apprehension . . . extradition . . . prohibiting further immigration of peoples from civilized planets . . ."

I said, "Hey, wait a minute! There's one thing they *can't* do! According to interplanetary law, no government can forbid the right of free trade, barter and exchange!"

Lancelot's uncle smiled.

"Absolutely right, Sparks," he agreed. "And *that* is where *we* come in!"

A DEAD silence followed his pronouncement. Then the air began sizzling with a hot, frying sound. That was Hanson preparing to blow a verbal fuse. He exploded like a retread on a hot day.

"*So!*" he roared. "So that's the kind of a company I been workin' for all these years? Well, Vice-president, here's my rocket—" He tore his precious spaceman's emblem from his breast and hurled it to the floor—"and here's my brevet—" He ripped the golden epaulets from his coat, and heaved them after the rocket—"and the hell with you and the I.P.C., sir! Any outfit which would be so stinkin' niggardly as to *trade* with a crew of scoundrels like that—"

Lanse Biggs said mildly, "Now, Dad! Don't be hasty. After all—"

The Old Man stared at his First Mate and son-in-law sadly. "You, too, Lancelot? I'm disappointed in you, my boy. I never thought *you'd* fall in line with—"

Biggs' uncle said, "You are a very impetuous person, Captain Hanson. If you will let me continue—"

"I don't want to hear no more," growled Hanson. "Go 'way and leave me alone!"

"But let Uncle Prenny tell you, Dad!" pleaded Biggs.

"The hell with—"

"He can tell *me*," I broke in. "And if there's not a quick change of theme, I'm going to do a little snoot-poking before I leave—with the skipper. Go ahead, Mr. Biggs."

"You are *two* very impetuous men," decided Prendergast Biggs, "and I am surprised that you could think your employers would—but never mind. Let me assure you that we have no intention of dealing with these criminals on a friendly basis. On the contrary, we are going to do our utmost to break their grip on the suffering citizens of Iris.

"As Sparks has already commented, there is one thing the usurpers of Iris *cannot* legally do. That is, forbid the right of free trade and commerce between other planets and the captive Irisians.

"On the other hand, they *can* forbid

the establishment of any community, outpost, or permanent trading-station upon their planetoid. They can prevent unwanted outsiders from becoming citizens of their base. In short, strangers may *visit* Iris, but they cannot stay there."

"Then, why—?" began the Old Man.

"However," continued the Vice-president, "there is a loophole they have overlooked. That is the clause in interplanetary law which reads: *'Any person or group of persons who discover, create or otherwise develop a hitherto undeveloped industry dependent upon the natural resources of any planet in the system are granted the privilege of establishing settlement upon that body for a period not to exceed thirty-five Solar years.'*"

He smiled at us. "That, gentlemen, is the entering-wedge with which we plan to crack the defenses of these tyrants who hold Iris in their grip!"

I stared at him confusedly.

"I don't get it, sir! You mean we're going into some kind of business on Iris?"

"Precisely, Sparks."

"But—but *what?* Iris is just a bleak little hunk of rock swinging in the Asteroid Belt. It doesn't have any soil to grow things in, any bodies of water to fish in. It doesn't *have* any 'natural resources' we can develop. So what excuse are we going to offer for barging into Iris?"

"WE NEED no excuse for barging in, Sparks," pointed out Lancelot Biggs soberly. "It is our right and privilege to do so. All we need do is claim we mean to develop a new natural industry, and by space law they are forced to admit us for a ten day investigatory period. If by the end of that time we have proven our right to remain, they must let us do so. And we, being on Iris, can then call upon the Space Patrol to 'protect' our property . . . the Patrol can move in . . . and wipe out the pirates."

"Sure!" snorted Cap Hanson. "Sure, that all sounds swell! But in ten measly days what new industry are we goin' to develop on Iris? Like Sparks says, they ain't no natural resources."

"Oh, that?" smiled Biggs' uncle Prendergast. "Why, that has already been arranged. We are going to make *—soap!*"

"S—soap!" gasped Cap Hanson.

"Soap!" I bleated. "Pardon me all to hell, sir, but somebody's crazy! Soap isn't a natural resource. It doesn't grow on trees or come up out of mines. You make it out of oil and fats and—"

"We're not thinking of that kind of soap, Sparks. I mean the form of hard soap used by miners, grease-monkeys and other manual laborers. Soap made out of pumice-stone. Our geological reports indicate that Iris, being composed mainly of igneous rock formations, is rich in pumice. All we have to do is locate an area rich in this material, start mining operations, and —bingo! We have Steichner and his crew of rascals right where we want them."

And that, lads and lassies, was Jolt No. 3! I knew about the Iris situation, but this was the first time I had ever heard the name of its kingpin and instigator. Hearing it, I winced. Steichner! Otto Steichner! The cunningest, meanest, toughest unhanged scoundrel who ever shoved a baby through an airlock—he was our antagonist!

I moaned feebly and pawed at my sagging jowls.

"Examine me quick, buddy," I begged the waiting doctor, "while my blood pressure is zero minus. Something tells me I don't *want* to go along

on this expedition. Steichner!"

Lanse Biggs stared at me curiously.

"Why, don't tell me you're afraid, Sparks?"

"It's not that. It's just that I—I'm allergic to soap."

"Nonsense!" pooh-poohed his uncle. "Why, cleanliness is next to godliness, Donovan."

"That's what the rulebooks say," I conceded. "But in this case—cleanliness is next to insanity! Lead on, Sawbones. And here's hoping my veins are positively acrawl with something terrible . . ."

BUT no such luck! As it turned out, we didn't wait for the results of the medical examination to be tabulated before we lifted gravs. Something—I wouldn't know what—upset the routine, with the result that we took off that night for Iris. If you ask me, I think it was Cap Hanson's doings. I think he was afraid he might not pass the physical, and he wanted to be sure of being on the bridge for at least one more trip on the *Saturn*.

So we lifted gravs and with Lanse Biggs at the studs set course and traj for little Iris, a mere hop-skip-and-jump from Earth since we were using the V-I unit. For the first time in a long while, Diane Biggs didn't make the shuttle with us. Biggs' wife—the Old Man's daughter—wasn't feeling up to par. Neither was *I*, but they didn't give *me* any raincheck!

Anyhow, in just a little longer time than it takes to digest a day's victuals we were hovering in the strato a mile or so above the capital city of Iris, identifying ourselves to the port authorities on the ground below.

"Who are you," demanded the Iris dispatcher, "and what do you want here?"

"I.P.C. freighter *Saturn*," I tapped back, "requesting privilege to land under spacecode regulation 14, paragraph *iv*. May we come in?"

"Just a minute," advised my contact. He cleared and we waited breathlessly. When he came back again, it was on the telaudio rather than via the bug. The visor screen brightened, and we were looking into the scowling pan of none other than the big boss himself, Otto Steichner.

"Well?" he demanded.

Cap Hanson took over. He said boldly, "What seems to be the trouble, sir? We made a simple request for permission to land. We are an exploring expedition attempting to set up a new industry under spacecode regula—"

"I know all about that," growled Steichner. "Well, you're wasting your time, Captain. Iris has no natural resources, and wants no colonists. You'd better try somewhere else."

Cap said stolidly, "My Company's instructions—"

"Your Company be damned!" roared Steichner, his neck thickening darkly. "I control Iris, and I want no busybodies interfering with my—"

Biggs moved forward to the visor plate. When I say moved, I mean exactly that. Even his best friend could never honestly describe his peculiar means of locomotion as walking. His lanky frame lurches along in a cross between a gallop and a trot . . . a sort of a bowlegged-pig-in-a-mirror-maze motion. He coughed embarrassedly, and his liquescent larynx performed incredible involutions.

He said, "Er—this is most distressing, Governor Steichner. Of course you realize that if we are not permitted to effect a landing we will be obliged to report the matter to our employers? And they, in turn, will naturally report it to the Space Patrol—"

WELL, that did it. Steichner was playing a cautious, tricky game. Trying to get by within the barest shadow of the Law. In order to *bar* the Space Patrol from his domain, he had to live up to certain interplanetary regulations which forbade their marching in on him.

His eyes flashed dangerously, but he gave in.

"Very well, gentlemen. You may land. But remember! You have only ten days in which to prove there are natural resources upon Iris which you can develop commercially. If in that length of time you have not succeeded, you must leave."

"We understand that," said Biggs. "Thank you, sir!"

And so, unwanted guests of a most unwilling host, we laid the *Saturn* down in the lair of an acknowledged band of space-pirates. It was a piece of daring which, had I had time to consider it, would have given me more goose-pimples than a Siberian fan-dancer. But as it happened, I was too busy to bother about it. For, as Biggs was maneuvering the *Saturn* to its cradle, my bug started chattering, and it was Joe Marlowe calling from Lunar III. What he had to say was puh-lenty.

"That you, Donovan?" he tap-tapped. "Greetings, pal! They ache today?"

"What," I shot back, "are you talking about?"

"Your feet, of course. We just got the reports from the medical examiners. They say your tootsies are as flat as a pair of toed flounders. That makes you the same at both ends, doesn't it?"

I stiffened.

"Stop wasting juice," I advised him, "and give out. You got the reports? What do they say? Is the Old Man—"

"Sturdy," rattled Marlowe, "is the word for Hanson. Your Skipper's as chipper as a kipper. You're O.Q. Todd is O.Q. Bronson and McMurtrie and Anderson are O.Q. The crew checks one hundred percent. Enderby needs two teeth filled; otherwise O.Q. Blaster Jacobs needs sun-lamp Vitamin C, but otherwise O.Q. As a matter of fact—"

One name was conspicuous by its absence. My gizzard turned over slowly. I interrupted, "Marlowe—look back over your list. Didn't you forget somebody? How about—?"

The answer came back slowly, almost sympathetically. Even over the dit-da-dits you can read expression in talented fingers. Marlowe tapped:

"I'm sorry, Donovan. I'm very sorry to have to tell you this, but there is one unfavorable report. The examiners have declared one man aboard the *Saturn* to be absolutely unfit for space travel. His heart is so bad that it may give out at any minute. That man is ——First Officer Biggs!"

WELL, there you are! Somehow I managed to take down the conclusion of the memo and sign off. But all the while I was doing so my brain was churning with the doleful tidings I had received; the thought kept repeating over and over again: *"Biggs—grounded! Lancelot Biggs—unfit for space travel!"*

My memory flashed back to the day when, almost three years ago, that tow-headed youngster had first gangled aboard the *Saturn,* fresh out of the Academy and not yet dry behind the ears. Fourth Mate he had been then, with no more responsibility than a laundress in a nudist camp. The Old Man had not liked him, partly because he was eccentric, mostly because he had avowed his intention of placing a gold band around the third finger, left hand, of the charmer whose name was at that time Diane Hanson.

But somehow Lanse Biggs had overcome these handicaps, by persistence worked himself up to the position of First Officer, by wit and guile and intelligence come through every obstacle set before him, by sheer determination proven to the skipper that he would make a good son-in-law.

His inventive genius had given mankind the velocity-intensifier unit, the uranium speech-trap, the first safe way of descending to the planet Jupiter—oh, why go on? Biggs' discoveries are as prominent as the Adam's-apple in his neck, and that's plenty outstanding!

But now, his future assured, his erratic past behind him, Biggs was to be exiled from the space he loved. Biggs—grounded! Lancelot Biggs—unfit for space travel!

So coursed my gloomy thoughts as I sat there in the silence of my radio turret. I did not even notice the *Saturn* was easing into a cradle. My first intimation that were were on Iris came with the arrival of Cap Hanson. He came burbling into my cubby, happy as a bee in a honeysuckle vine.

"O.Q., Sparks—we done it! We're on Iris. Shoot a message to Earth that we—Hey! What's the matter? Sick?"

Without a word I handed him my transcript of the report. He scanned it swiftly.

"Ah, the medical report, eh? Glory be, Sparks, this is wonderful! I passed! Isn't that swell? And you passed . . . and Todd . . . and . . ."

Then he stopped as abruptly as I had. A cloud swept across his forehead leaving his eyes darkened and sombre. In a whisper he said, "Lancelot—!"

I said, "That's the end of the chapter, Skipper. For three years the *Saturn* has been the finest ship in the fleet. We've done more tough jobs and had more fun than any bunch of spacemen who ever lifted gravs under the same emblem. But it ends now. When Lanse Biggs leaves this ship, nothing will be the same ever again."

"His heart," faltered the Old Man. "Who would have believed there was anything wrong with his heart? I know he's skinny, and all that, but he always seemed healthy enough—"

"Where is he now?"

"What? Oh—outside. He's trying to make a purchase of some real estate, Sparks. It don't matter much just *where* he buys, so long as he buys. The whole asteroid's honeycombed with pumice pockets, you see. All we got to do is buy up some land, start diggin', produce hard soap and earn the right to remain here. But—his heart! Sparks, I can't believe—"

"Hush!" I warned him. "If those sounds aren't a herd of antelopes on rollerskates, I think that's him coming now."

Cap Hanson crumpled the flimsy, jammed it deep into his pocket.

"Not a word about this, Sparks! Not yet. We—we've got to break it gently!"

I NODDED just as Biggs, grinning from ear to ear and back again, lurched into the turret. On his right arm he was carrying a queer looking little squeegee. At first I thought it was a teddy bear. Then it moved, and I realized I was in the presence of a native Irisian. He—or it—was a curious little squirrel-like creature with big, goggling eyes, a huge bushy tail and enormous whiskers.

Biggs chirruped cheerfully, "Here's one of the local boys, folks! Sparks, you speak Irisian, don't you? Well—"

He paused, glancing at each of us questioningly. "What's the matter?

You two look as if you'd lost your best friend."

Cap Hanson essayed a laugh. It sounded like an echo from a torture chamber.

"Nothin' at all, son. We was just discussin' the difficulties of the problem ahead of us, that's all. So that's an Irisian, huh? And you can talk to it, Sparks?"

He looked at me with new respect. I smiled. "If my Academy prof wasn't just fooling," I told him, "I can." And I turned to the little rodent, twisting my lips into a series of purring whistles which meant "Greetings!"

"Phwee-twurdle-twurdle-pwwht!" replied the Irisian.

Cap Hanson looked at the asterite disconsolately.

"Needs oilin, don't he, Sparks?"

"Not a bit. That's his native tongue. He said how do you do."

"Yeah? Well, it didn't sound like it to me—"

Biggs suggested, "Ask him, Sparks. Ask him where we can buy or lease some property on Iris."

So I did. And the answer was encouraging. It seemed the little feller himself *chwee-fweeple-twee*—meaning he owned some property a few miles outside the capital city—and he'd be glad to sell us this patch of ground for *chirp-furdle-foo*—

I translated. Cap Hanson turned crimson with rage.

"Four thousand Earth credits! For a hunk of ground you could cover with a handkerchief? Ridiculous! We won't pay any such price—"

"It's no skin off our nose, Skipper," I reminded him. "The Corporation's paying for it."

Hanson nodded slowly.

"We-e-ell, maybe you got something there. We can't do no diggin' for soap without something to dig in. O.Q. Go ahead and make the deal, Sparks."

"And I," chimed in Biggs, "will organize the men and get to work on the digging—"

"No!" said Hanson hastily. "You mustn't exert yourself like that, boy. Remember your—"

He stopped abruptly. Lancelot glanced at him.

"What? Remember my *what*, Dad?"

"Nothin'. You stay here and direct the men; I'll get 'em onto the job."

So we became possessors of a bit of Iris terrain and set forth on the adventure which—we hoped—was to bring an end to Otto Steichner's rule over the tiny planetoid.

OF COURSE you know that Iris is only a little hunk of cosmic debris, about three hundred miles in diameter, busting along in the planetoid Belt, just one of myriad specks which are all that remain of what was once upon a time a planet like Earth in the space-sector between Mars and Jupiter. It has no atmosphere of its own, so when you leave the domed cities and villages you have to wear your bulger, and since its gravitational attraction is about as strong as a two-day old kitten, you have to wear clinch-plates in your sandals.

But our boys are a tough crew, accustomed to working under even worse conditions than these, and I'm not bragging too much when I say that in two shakes of a rocket's tail we had staked out our property and buckled down to our task.

Our "task" was, of course, just plain digging. From that grayish-looking topsoil we had to peel away the crumbling layers which would lead us to the basaltic depths beneath. From this substratum we must extract a quantity of the pumice which was to justify our presence here. A simple thing.

Only it didn't turn out that way. It took us three days to scrape off the detritus layer. Then we reached rock. But it wasn't exactly the sort of rock we had expected to find: obsidian or basalt, lava flow. It was sandstone. Gray shale.

Lancelot Biggs looked at samples of this rock and shook his head. He said, "Hmmm! That's funny! Sandstone is not an igneous formation. You know—"

"I don't know nothin'," said the Old Man, "except we ain't go too much time to spare. Let's get on with our job."

So we kept on digging. We had to use atomotors. The rock layer was tougher than a blue-plate steak, but slowly our blaster chunked its way through . . . to a layer of slate!

Cap Hanson said worriedly, "You reckon they might of made a mistake back on Earth, Lanse, boy? This here roofing material don't look like what we was supposed to find. Maybe there's pumice underneath, but—"

"Frankly," I said, "I doubt it. Pumice is the result of air bubbles mixing with an uncooled lava mixture. Slate is a sedimentary deposit. I think we've stumbled across a punk piece of ground, myself. We'd better go buy another hunk of property. Eh, Biggs?"

Lancelot Biggs said soberly, "If we want to locate pumice, I'm afraid so. I've been reading up on geological structure, and all the evidence indicates that—"

"Go see what you can do, then, Sparks," ordered the Old Man. "You're the only one of us which can talk Irisian. See if you can buy a nice soap-mine somewhere."

So I went. And I got nowhere—fast. The Irisian from whom we had bought this piece of property was nowhere to be found. He had "disappeared." No other native of the tiny planet would even listen to my pleas. The moment I started talking shop, they covered their fuzzy ears with furry claws and scuttled away.

Things began to make sense. In this maze of mystery I detected the fine touch of Otto Steichner. So I sought him in the armed citadel he called his gubernatorial White House. I put the question to him bluntly . . . which does not necessarily mean "boldly," because to tell the truth my knees were shaking like a bowl of unchilled jello when I marched into his guarded study.

"LAND?" repeated Steichner. "Land, Mr. Donovan? I'm afraid there is no property for sale on Iris. You see, everything here is owned by the government. Private individuals cannot buy or sell land."

I said, "But only five days ago we bought a piece of property from an Irisian named Tswrrrl. At the time, he mentioned that he had other properties for sale. But now I cannot seem to find him—"

"Tswrrrl? Tswrrrl? Ah, yes — " said the governor thoughtfully—"Tswrrrl! I remember now. An unfortunate incident. So careless of Tswrrrl. He was killed in an—er— accident a few days ago. Just the day before the Irisian government passed the new law forbidding the further sale of private properties, you know—"

"In other words," I said, "your bunch of thugs did him in? Is that it, Steichner?"

Steichner said silkily, "You do us an injustice, Mr. Donocan. We who control the government of Iris operate *within* the law at all times. That is why we find no need of allowing the Space Control within our sphere. Now, if you will excuse me? I am very busy—"

"In short," I said, "you don't intend to let us buy any more land. Is that it?"

"In short," replied Steichner, dropping his pretenses for a moment and giving me a stare which would have curdled a bottle of cream, "no! You have been given every legal opportunity, Mr. Donovan. You have been here on Iris exactly five and one half Solar Constant days. If, within ten days after your arrival, you have not demonstrated your ability to produce a commercial commodity heretofore undeveloped on this planet, you will be asked to leave."

I rose. "O. Q., Steichner," I told him grimly. "You hold the chips, now. But let me tell you this—if we *do* find what we're looking for, and gain the right to remain on Iris, our *first move* will be to call in the Space Patrol to protect our property. And you know what that means. It means the end of you and your gang . . . the end of your use of Iris as a base for marauding expeditions.

"You know that, Steichner. That's why you're—"

Steichner's face mottled unhealthily. He said in a gray voice, "You are talking dangerously, Donovan. Be careful no 'accident' stops *your* wagging tongue."

"If anything happens to me," I promised him, "you'll receive a visit from the Space Patrol before you can stutter 'nebular hypothesis,' Steichner. That's been arranged."

His lips were a white slit through which he gritted, "I quite understand, Donovan. But don't underestimate Otto Steichner. Even for *that* eventuality I am prepared. Now—get out!"

"Moreover—" I began.

"I said—*get out!*"

"SO," I concluded my story to the skipper and Lanse Biggs, "I scrammed across the bridge and over the lake and up to camp, here. And thus endeth my little attempt to buy more land. It just can't be done, boys and girls. That's a dead duck."

The Old Man frowned. He said, "Yeah, there's no use squawkin' about it; Steichner holds the whip hand. The worst of it is, he'll probably be able to kick us off Iris without doin' a thing to bring in the Patrol. I mean, we'll get the gate strictly legal. Because we still ain't found no sign of pumice, and we're pretty deep now—Well, Lancelot?"

Biggs had been thinking. You can always tell when he's thinking, because his feet shuttle from side to side like spectators' heads at a tennis-match. Now he said, "Across the *what* and over the *what,* Sparks?"

"Seriatim," I told him, "bridge and lake. So what's that got to do with the present situation? The problem before the board is—"

"I was just wondering," commented Biggs, "how there should be a *lake* on the planetoid Iris—and why? As we know, there are no natural bodies of water on this tiny orb. Therefore they must be artificial—"

"All right," growled the skipper, "so they're phoney! Maybe Steichner's got a sense of beauty!"

"Sure," I agreed. "What he likes best is a lovely dagger, attractively decorated with nice, fresh blood. Cap's right, Biggs. We're not here to marvel at the scenic wonders of Iris. We've got a job to do, and we're getting nowhere—fast!"

"You mean," said Biggs, "our excavations? I've been thinking about that, too. And it is beginning to make sense to me. You know my motto, Sparks: 'Get the theory first!' I think I've solved the theory, now. The only thing which still remains is to put

it into practice. But that lake—"

"You've solved it, Lanse, son?" broke in the Old Man eagerly. "Fine! Fine! I knew you wouldn't let us down. So what do we do?"

"Well, we must ask McMurtrie to rig up a hydraulic drill, first of all. Then we must—"

"Drill! To dig pumice? Son, you must be—"

Biggs shuffled embarrassedly.

"Well, it was only an idea, sir. Of course if you'd rather we can delve into the matter of that lake—"

"Never mind," said the Old Man hastily. "The drill it is. Anything to get your mind off that damn lagoon. O. Q. Issue the orders, Sparks."

So that was how we started boring instead of digging into the soil of Iris. And of course the shift of operations consumed still more of our ever-dwindling allotment of time. It took McMurtrie and his black gang a full day to rig up the hydraulic drill, and another day to set the cast so it would ram true. The next day we spent watching the diamondhead romp up and down in its casing, interrupting the steady *chug-chug!* every once in a while so Lancelot Biggs, who was watching the operation with the care and feverish attention of a mamma duck, could study the bore-facing.

He wiped his hand around the friction-heated facing and studied the granules. I craned over his shoulder and got a glimpse. I moaned.

"No go, Lanse. That *still* isn't pumice. I'm afraid Steichner wins. We've only got a little over one day to go, and it's no soap—hard *or* soft!"

BUT there was no discouragement in the eyes of Biggs. Instead, he was muttering with a sort of satisfaction, "Just as I thought. First shale . . . then slate . . . then this diatomaceous conglomerate. It is phenomenal, but it must be so. Sparks—" He turned to me suddenly—"Call Earth! Tell the authorities to dispatch fighting units of the Space Patrol immediately—to protect our property!"

"Our—?"

"Hurry! There's no time to waste. And—warn them to be very careful in approaching this planetoid. They must make no attempt to land until we signal them the way is clear. Understand?"

"Of—of course," I stammered. "You mean you think Steichner will put up a scrap rather than let them in. But are you sure you know what you're doing, Lanse? After all, a handful of grit—"

Biggs laughed triumphantly.

"But what grit, Sparks! What grit! See those bits of whitish colored substance?"

I looked again more closely at the powdery substance in the palm of his hand. I said, "Rock-measles?"

"Fossils, Sparks!"

"Fossils? But what have fossils got to do with—?"

"I can't tell you now. There is too much to be done. I've got to go down, for one thing, and have a look at that artificial lake beside the governor's mansion."

Cap Hanson, who had been off supervising the boring operations came up behind him just in time to overhear these final words. He asked.

"Still talkin' about that lake, Lancelot? What for? Why do you have to go down there and snoop around?"

"Because," explained Biggs, "I've been worrying about it, and I've just decided why it was built."

"Well?"

Biggs said slowly, "Steichner is a pirate; right?"

"Doubled and redoubled," I conceded, "in spades. So what?"

"We know he has a fleet of swift space-cruisers, no?"

"Yes."

"Well, then—*where are those cruisers?*"

I gulped and stared at him. So did Hanson. Then the two of us shook our heads and said together, "I don't know."

"Neither do I," admitted Biggs grimly, "for certain. But logic tells me it can be only one place. Hidden from view beneath the waters of that artificial lake — concealed, poised for deadly striking upon any unwary attacker!"

AND there's an example of typical Biggsian reasoning. It had never occurred to either of us to wonder at the absence of a spacefleet we should have known must be somewhere around. But the moment Biggs hurled his bombshell we knew he must be right. It was the only explanation which satisfied the mystery of the lake on lakeless Iris. Steichner moored his spacecraft under water to hide them from the view of potentially hostile visitors. From their aqueous vantage-point they could emerge in the split of a second, guns spewing lethal flames to smash down the Patrol if and when the Patrol ever moved to capture Steichner's stronghold!

I yelped, "Great swooning serpents, let me get to my bug—" and started for the ship's radio. But Biggs grabbed my shoulder.

"Not so fast, Sparks! Don't send any warning about the lake in your message—not even in Company code. Steichner is a clever man. His experts might discover we knew their secret, and that would be just too bad—for us. We'd upset their applecart, yes; but we wouldn't be alive to enjoy the fruits of our victory. And—" He grinned wryly—"oddly enough, I have an ardent desire to keep on living."

It was the suddenness of his words which trapped the Old Man. He nodded and said reassuringly, "Of course, my boy. And you will. Why, these days a bum ticker doesn't mean anything. Lots of men have 'em and perk right along—"

Then he stopped, crimsoning, as he realized what he had said. Biggs stared at him open-mouthed, then turned to me. I avoided his eyes. I couldn't help it. Biggs said, "Bum ticker, Dad?"

Hanson said miserably, "I'm sorry, boy. I meant to break it gentler than that, but it sort of slipped out."

"You mean—" said Biggs dazedly—"I didn't pass the physical examination? It—it showed my heart was bad?"

I nodded. "That's right, Lanse."

"But—but it can't be! I feel perfect. I—" His eyes darkened with a new fear. "I'll be grounded!" he cried.

Hanson said, "I'm sorry, son. But you'll still work for the Corporation, of course. And you'll have lots of time at home with Diane. It—it's even better than battin' around in space—"

But he wasn't kidding a soul. Least of all Lancelot Biggs who, for a moment, turned his back to us. When he again faced us there was a curious moisture in his eyes. Which, considering the fact that in the rarified atmosphere of Iris we were all wearing lightweight bulgers, could not have come from blowing dust.

He said in a low voice, "Well—get that message off, Sparks. I'll run on along about my errand. For if I'm not very much mistaken, we'll have visitors within the next few hours. As soon as Steichner's radiomen break down your code."

And he disappeared toward the city,

a lean and lanky, somehow strangely forlorn looking Biggs. . . .

WELL, I sent the message. It cleared through Johnny Holmes at Long Island Spaceport, and Holmes was so excited he almost busted a finger on the key as he chattered back at me.

"No fooling, Donovan? You've succeeded in locating pumice?"

"We've succeeded in locating," I told him, "something. Don't ask me what. I'm only the hired help around here. But Biggs says it's O.Q., and whatever he says is all right with me. So goose the Rocketeers and get 'em on their way here as soon as possible—if not sooner."

"Right!" snapped Holmes. "Consider them started!"

So that was that. I wandered back to the digs, there waited for the second part of Biggs' prophecy to be fulfilled. It didn't take long. About four hours later —Earth standard, of course; you can't figure hours on a tiny planetoid which has no axial revolution —a monocar came blistering from the capital city to our encampment. It was packed to the gunwales, mostly with armed guards and Steichner. Steichner was packed to the gunwales, too, mostly with fury. He hurled himself from the speedster and strode to Hanson's side.

"Captain Hanson, may I ask the meaning of this?"

He jammed a sheet of paper under the Old Man's nose. On it was typed a complete, interpreted transcription of the message I had recently sent to Earth.

The skipper took it, studied it slowly, coolly. He said, "Same to you, Governor Steichner. May I ask how you got a copy of a message which was sent in private code?"

"That," blustered the politico, "is neither here nor there. My men are experts at deciphering such messages. What I demand to know is, by what right have you summoned a force of Space Patrolmen to *my* planet?"

The Old Man didn't know. He was as much in the dark as a blindfolded mole in a blackout. But he bluffed it through.

"Why," he said calmly, "under Regulation 19, section *xvii* of the spacecode, of course. To protect our property."

"Property?" roared Steichner. "*What* property? Don't try to pretend to me, sir, that you have succeeded in finding pumice on this terrain!"

I broke in, "So you even knew what we were searching for, eh, Steichner?"

"Naturally. I leave nothing to chance, gentlemen—nothing. Before your ship left Earth, I had been advised as to the trick by means of which you intended to gain a foothold on this asteroid. And care was taken that the property you were allowed to 'purchase'—at a handsome price, for which I thank you, gentlemen! — held no basaltic deposits.

"Well, Captain—answer me! Have you, or have you not, unearthed any pumice deposits?"

The answer came from a few rods away. Biggs had returned from his exploring trip. Now he took over, a fact for which the skipper was obviously grateful.

"The answer, Governor Steichner, is —no. We have not!"

"Ah! Then by what right, Lieutenant, did you summon the Patrol to Iris? You realize you were given but ten days to locate and develop a heretofore undeveloped industry upon Iris? And by your own admission, you have failed to find that for which you came—"

"TRUE," admitted Biggs easily. "Quite true, Steichner. But though we have failed to find pumice, we have found something else. Another commodity never before exploited on Iris. We thereby earn the right to stay here for thirty-five years . . . and to call in the Patrol to protect our rights . . ."

Steichner's fingers worked convulsively.

"*Another* product, sir? Out of this bleak, worthless soil! Impossible!"

And Biggs shook his head.

"Incredible, sir. But not impossible. Because, you see, it exists. Unless my latest estimates are completely in error, our drill should strike, at any minute now, a pocket of that substance which was created when Iris was still a part of a mighty planet swinging in an orbit between mars and Jupter. A commodity of great value . . . an essential fuel . . ."

"What?" roared Steichner. "What are you talking about, you blithering idiot?"

Biggs didn't answer him. He didn't have to. For at that moment there rose a sudden warning shout from where our workers tended the diamond-head drill. Voices raised in swift alarm, from the ground beneath our feet came a strange roaring, rushing, gushing sound. And even as the workmen fled, the superstructure of our drill shattered and flew high into the thin air of Iris—borne aloft on a pillar of thick black goo!

And *"Oil!"* cried Lancelot Biggs triumphantly. *"Oil,* Steichner! That is the new industry which grants us the right to remain here!"

WELL, it was a victory, all right—but for a minute I thought it was going to be a victory with flowers. For Otto Steichner's mouth turned livid with rage as he realized he had lost his tight grip on the planetoid Iris; his hand leaped to his belt, and for the space of a held breath I felt certain he would ray us all down in our tracks.

It was the oil which saved us. Pluming skyward, its jet hit a half-mile ceiling. Then, because Iris is not *entirely* airless, and has a *slight* gravitation, the column unbrellaed and splashed earthward. A viscous rain began splattering all around and over us. A greasy black torrent which turned us all into tar-babies before we could duck for shelter.

Steichner gasped, choked, and raced toward his monocar. But as his cohorts piled into it with him, he roared back at us:

"This isn't goodbye, gentlemen! I have other and more important things to take care of right now. But when I have disposed of the Space Patrol fleet, then I will return to take care of *you!*"

Out of range of the oily deluge, Cap Hanson turned a serious face to Biggs.

"Disposed of the Space Patrol? What does he mean?"

Biggs replied soberly, "I'm afraid he means just what he said, sir. My guess about the lake was right. It *is* the hiding place of his fleet. Steichner will flee there now, man his ships, and lie in wait for the Patrol. When the fleet arrives—"

I said, "Well, then, golly—let's lift the *Saturn* out of here! Beat it out into space, and stop the Fleet—?"

But Biggs shook his head.

"No—I have a better plan than that. Oh, Chief—" He called to Chief Engineer McMurtrie who, dripping with fuel oil and pride, was hobbling back toward the ship for a change of clothing—"nice work on that drill. Tell the men to cap the well for the time being. Did you get those metal poles I asked

you for?"

"Yes, sorrr!"

"Good! And the silver?"

"About three tons of it, sorrr!"

"Silver?" broke in Hanson. "Three tons of it? Why, you must be talkin' about that specie shipment in the A-deck bins. You can't touch that, Lancelot. It ain't ours to use. It belongs to—"

"It belongs to humanity," declared Biggs. "No price is too high to pay for the overthrow of Steichner's crew."

He glanced at his wrist chrono.

"What time did you wire the Patrol, Sparks?"

"Eleven-oh-three-ack-em."

"Hmmm! They should arrive in less than six hours. We must get to work. All right, Chief. You know where I want those materials. And don't forget the salt!"

"No, sorrr!"

"Salt!" moaned Hanson. "Migawd, what now? You ain't goin' to cook and *eat* Steichner?"

Lancelot Biggs smiled tightly.

"No, not entirely. All I'm going to cook is his goose."

WHAT happened in those next few hours makes sense to me now, but it didn't while it was going on. I'll admit that without a tremor. But, then, few ordinary mortals do understand what L. Biggs is driving at until he pops up at the end of his endeavors with a Q. E. D. clenched in his molars.

All I knew was, that by the time our gang got from the camp down to the capital city, Steichner and his crowd had disappeared. The city was empty save for a few assorted thousand fuzzy Irisians scampering around, whimpering dolefully because they didn't know what was going on.

Otto and his mobile units had taken a run-out powder. But, as Biggs had hunched it, they hadn't gone far. Just into their spaceships which lay a few yards below the placid surface of the artificial lake beside the governor's mansion.

Under Biggs' directions, McMurtrie's men got going. Their first move was to dump a holdful of ordinary tablesalt, residue of a cargo we had never completely discharged, into the lake. That was screwy enough, and drew a murmur from the Old Man. His murmur changed to a moan when they followed this move by dumping into the lake those bins of silver ore which Biggs had mentioned.

Then came the whackiest part of all. Biggs implanted one of the two metal uprights McMurtrie had forged for him in the southernmost extremity of the lake. Then—with the help of a tractor crew, of course; the things were twenty feet long—he set its mate at the other end of the lake, connected wires from the posts to the hypatomic motors of our ship.

All this took time, naturally. A lot of time. Maybe too much time. Because he had scarcely finished these preparations when there came a message from the commandant of the S.P. flagship:

"Ahoy, Iris! S. P. Cruiser Pollux approaching. Clear cradles for official landing!"

Our physical labor completed, we were back in my radio turret now. As we picked up this omniwave call, Biggs spun to me excitedly.

"Sparks—contact Steichner immediately!"

I twisted the dials, finally succeeded in picking up the wavelength of the submerged Irisian governor's set. Biggs spoke clearly over the audio.

"Governor Steichner, this is Lt. Lancelot Biggs aboard the *Saturn*. Can you hear me?"

Steichner's reply shot back savagely.

"I can, Lieutenant. Have patience. I will take care of you when this other little matter has been attended to."

"I called to warn you," said Biggs expressionlessly, "that you are in gravest peril. I am offering you a chance to surrender peaceably. Will you do so?"

Steichner's answer isn't printable. It was a blunt refusal. Biggs sighed.

"Very well, Governor. Then let me issue this final warning: Do not attempt to lift gravs from your present location! And do not attempt to use your ordnance. To do so will be to court instant and terrible death!"

"Why, you—!" spluttered back Steichner's retort.

But Biggs had turned from the audio, pressed a stud activating the hypoes of our ship. A dull growl surged about us as the powerful motors stirred into action.

I stared at him questioningly.

"What are you trying to do, Lanse? Scare Steichner into surrendering?"

"No, Sparks. I meant every word I said. Look at the lake."

I FLASHED on the visilens, swung it to cover outside. And what I saw there broke a gasp from my lips.

The surface of the lake was alive with tiny, frothy bubbles. The whole lake was seething with motion.

Cap Hanson cried, "Sweet saint, now I understand! You—you've turned that lake into a stew-kettle! You're boilin' 'em alive!"

"No!" I contradicted. "It can't be that. The ships are insulated against the absolute zero of space. Heat and cold mean nothing to them. Electricity! You must be electrocuting them, Biggs—?"

"You're *half* right," acknowledged my lanky friend. "Not electro*cuting*, though—"

He never finished his sentence. For at that moment there came to us over our still-connected audio the voice of Governor Otto Steichner issuing a command to his men.

"Fleet, prepare for action! Set studs! Battle formation! Set to lift gravs—"

"No!" cried Biggs. "Don't, Steichner! It will mean death to you all!"

"Ready!" rasped the stern voice. "Follow me! *Lift!*"

There sounded the rising tumult of mighty motors thundering into action. Then:

"The fools!" cried Lancelot Biggs pityingly. "The poor doomed fools! Why wouldn't they believe me?"

And my eyes swiveled to the visiplate once more, just in time to see the last act of the little drama. It came with terrible suddenness, devastating completeness. The waters of the churning lake boiled fiercely for a fraction of an instant as a half dozen spaceships jetted simultaneously. Then from the inwards of the lake, as from a gigantic steam-bomb, burst a violent sheet of flame. A coruscating, eye-blinding moment of brilliance . . . then another . . . and another . . . six, all told.

Then—silence. Quietude. And the sad voice of Mr. Biggs saying, "Cut the connection, Chief McMurtrie. Our task is ended. . . ."

I got it, then. I'm slow, but eventually I always straighten things out. I stared at Biggs with a sort of horrible fascination. I said, "So that's it. You didn't try to harm them. You simply *electroplated their ships!*"

"That's it, Sparks," acknowledged Biggs sadly. "And when they attempted to jet from the lake, their blasts backfired against the silver barricade deposited over their ports. Their ships exploded like living bombs!"

LATER, as our workmen reversed the polarity of Biggs' gigantic electroplating apparatus to reclaim as much as possible of the silver used in the operation, the commander of the Space Patrol fleet stopped by to offer his congratulations.

"It was a magnificent job, gentlemen," said he. "We commend you on having helped the System in ridding itself of one of its few remaining pestholes. Henceforth, the Irisians will govern themselves in freedom and contentment. Meanwhile, if your Corporation wishes to maintain its property rights on Iris, we shall of course honor your discovery of fuel oil."

He paused, staring at Biggs.

"But how did you know there was fuel oil on Iris, Mr. Biggs? Other geologists had never detected its presence."

Biggs flushed.

"I didn't know," he confessed. "As a matter of fact, I suspect that little oil-well will run itself dry in less than two days. You see, it can be but a tiny pocket, at most. The asteroid *is* mostly composed of igneous rock formations. My guess is that it comprised the side of a volcanic mountain on the planet of which it was once, ages ago, a part. When the planet exploded, a minute portion of the mountain valley was torn away with this fragment. It was from this ancient peat bog the oil derived.

"I began to guess there might be a vestige of oil when we dug up black slate. That is the invariable residue of submersion. Then, when we found the fossiliferous rocks, I knew we were on the right track. It—it was just luck."

"Well, luck or not," said the space officer heartily, "you certainly grasped every advantage which came your way. We need spacemen like you, Biggs!"

And—there it was again! For the first time in many hours, another reminder of the fate overhanging Biggs. Space needed men like Biggs . . . but by virtue of a medical examination, he had been declared unfit for space travel!

The Old Man's face clouded. He said slowly, "There's another delicate problem. If Lance can't stand space travel, what are we goin' to do? Take him home, or leave him here on Iris?"

Biggs said resignedly, "You'd better call Earth and find out, Sparks."

So I contacted H.Q. And when I had asked my question there was a moment of silence. Then the bug-pounder on the other end of the connection said, "Do with Biggs? What do you *want* to do with him, Donovan? Why, bring him home, of course."

I said, "But if his heart won't stand the trip—"

"Heart? Heart? What's matter with Biggs' heart?"

"Why, the medico reported—"

"Oh, that!" pooh-poohed the Earth operator. "That was a mistake—didn't I tell you? The examiners got mixed up. It seems their orders were to examine *every* single man aboard the *Saturn,* with no exceptions. And since there were *two* Biggs on board—"

Biggs, who had been listening to the message come in, jerked like a spitballed schoolmarm.

"Uncle Prenny!" he yelled. "They got him mixed up with me. I'm the *First* Mate and he's the *First* Vice-president. They probably just entered the report that the 'First Officer' was unfit for space travel! Uncle Prenny's heart has been bad for thirty years!"

I grunted contentedly and cut the connection. "Then all's well," I said, "that ends swell, huh?"

The Old Man, too, grinned happily.

"Right you are, Sparks. From now on our troubles are over. Peace and contentment from now on. . . ."

But with Biggs aboard the *Saturn,* that's a thousand-to-one shot. Any bets?

"Look!" she said. "A city!"

THE HOLLOW PLANET

by DON WILCOX

All the universe was solid rock, and it was a crime to tunnel; but these two defied the Law

IT WAS Randolph Hill's first earthquake, and it unleashed its terrors upon him without warning.

Hill's two traveling companions slipped and tumbled into the fissure that opened under their feet. The ripping earth roared like a thousand wild beasts and vomited rocks at them as they tried to leap to safety.

Randolph Hill saw their faces, white and twisted. That was the shock and the pain of death. Rocks heaved as if blown from guns. Luggage and clothing flew to pieces, arms and legs were torn from bodies—and those glimpses were the last Randolph Hill had of his two companions.

The fissure opened again, a gaping, mile-long ditch, and Hill rolled into it.

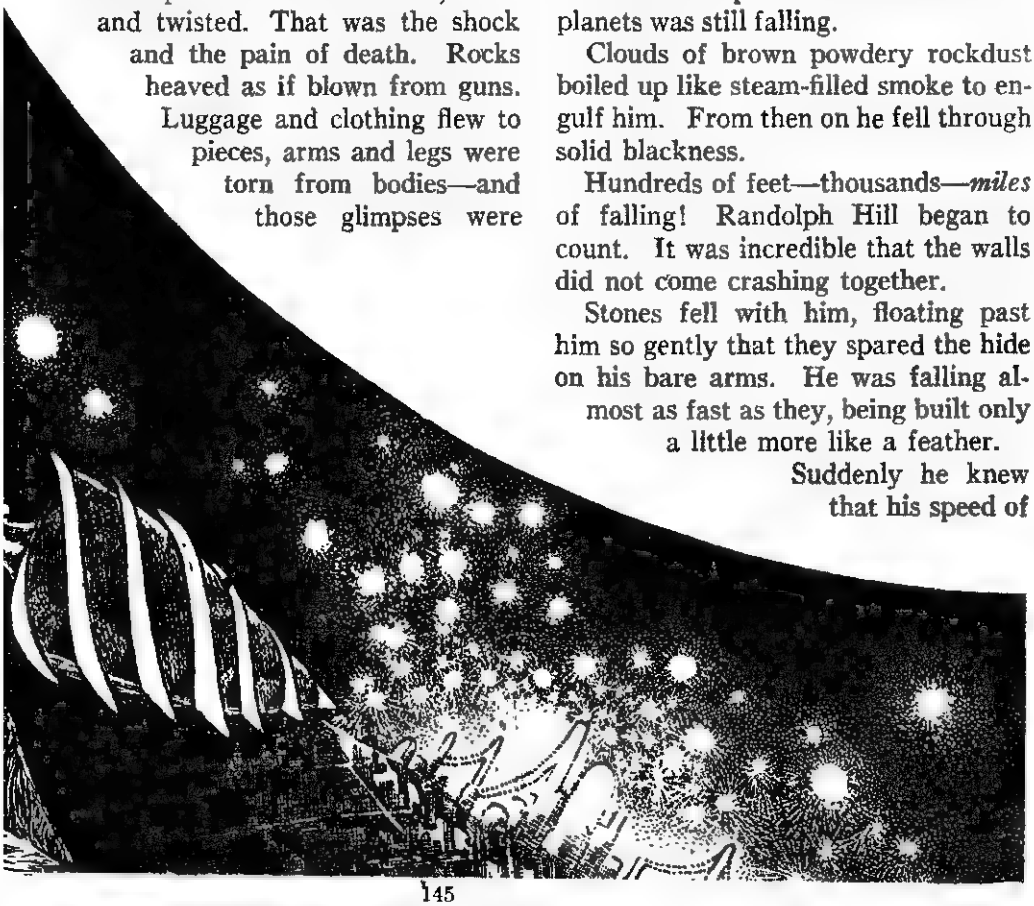
He was falling—falling—falling into the bottomless gash. The thunder of crushing stones was on all sides of him. Vacuums crackled with the concussion of winds. And Randolph Hill, the noted explorer and man-about-planets was still falling.

Clouds of brown powdery rockdust boiled up like steam-filled smoke to engulf him. From then on he fell through solid blackness.

Hundreds of feet—thousands—*miles* of falling! Randolph Hill began to count. It was incredible that the walls did not come crashing together.

Stones fell with him, floating past him so gently that they spared the hide on his bare arms. He was falling almost as fast as they, being built only a little more like a feather.

Suddenly he knew that his speed of



fall was retarding. The thickness of air was cushioning his drop. It was such dense air that he had to fight to keep his lungs pumping against the pressure.

Randolph Hill fell until he reached a point where everything was coming to rest—rocks, air, falling bodies. He drifted to a stop without landing. The rocks, floating like balloons around him, crowded him down, and farther down, until he was below the gravitational center that had drawn him.

Gravity now pulled him upward, but the rocks were packing tight above his shoulders.

RANDOLPH HILL groped through the blackness. The strangest sensations were gripping his body. Arms as sluggish as slabs of lead. Legs that responded like masses of concrete.

He was heavy. The steel grip of gravity held him.

All sense of direction had left him.

He blew the dust from his face and endeavored to breathe. The air pressed him like a rubber suit tightening over his body. The smell of hot stone was stifling.

He did nothing but breathe for many minutes. Then it seemed that more feeling was returning to the mass of paralysis that was his body. He reached out . . . Nothing.

Which way to go?'

His shirt caught between the stones proved which way he had come from. But that way was closed.

The strangeness of his situation evoked a bitter laugh from Randolph Hill. Now he was tending to *fall up*. All the blackness below him was, so far as his groping arms could discover, empty space.

But no longer could he *fall* downward. The only way to get farther was to climb. And *down* was the only possible direction—if it could still be called *down*. Randolph Hill climbed.

Twenty hours later he was still climbing.

II

WHEN faint light seeped through the jagged fissure to greet Randolph Hill's eyes he was almost past believing it could be true.

He was more dead than alive, more blind than seeing. There was only the dim realization that he had been climbing. Upward? Apparently so. Here he was ascending to a landscape of ugly grayish black clouds groping upward on hands and knees through the mouth of a narrow cave.

Was he really out?

All that attracted him upon that first return of light were the bright blue lakes. He saw three of them very close. Without an instant's hesitation, he staggered toward them.

They hung before him with a mirage-like effect, seeming to lie *on edge*.

As if by magic they receded from him. His lips were so dry and swollen that he couldn't even manage his bitterest laugh—the laugh that had carried him through a hundred hardships the average man couldn't have endured.

Before Randolph Hill reached the nearest lake, the black clouds above him released their load, and the torrents of rain beat down. Hill dropped to the soggy ground and lay with mouth wide open.

He welcomed the harsh winds and the tattoo of hammering raindrops. They pounded new life into him.

Hours later after the clouds had broken and scurried on, Randolph Hill still lay on his back gazing at the new world. All around him it rose. As far as he could see the little patches of bright blue lay flat like windows in the great spherical walls of land.

This was the inside of an immense ball. It was everywhere around him, seemingly the whole surface of a planet turned outside-in.

He could not see to the top for the distance defied vision. Moreover, directly overhead, in what appeared to be the center of this vast globe, there was a cloud of blinding brightness. Its bluish-white light screened the upper areas of this enclosed world.

A hollow planet it was. How it could be, how long it had been, how it could contain lakes and rivers and clouds and windstorms—yes, and villages teeming with people—these and a thousand kindred questions were Randolph Hill's to ask.

Before he left this hollow planet he would find some of the answers.

III

AS THE fates would have it, Randolph Hill never left the hollow planet.

He lived the rest of his life there, always searching for the lost tunnel by which he had entered, but never finding it.

Of all his interplanetary findings, none was so unique as the discovery of this enclosed world. But for all his dreams of returning home with the story of its wonders, he was denied that satisfaction. The fates had spared his life, but he was trapped. The hollow planet became his prison.

With the passing of time he tried to resign himself.

When he died he was buried in secret by one who loved him and partially understood him.

Among the few personal things that were buried with him was a notebook.

What he had written in it about life in the hollow planet would apply equally well to the times before his coming, or to the generations that followed him. Life here was almost changeless.

Randolph Hill lived and died, and time went on. Generations passed.

IV

LITTLE Voileen was blue-eyed and all smiles until she started to school and the boys began teasing her about her great-grandfather.

"He was a crazy man," the big boys would yell at her. "People called him Madman Hill."

Voileen's blue eyes would grow wide with dismay. She knew nothing about her great-grandfather except that her father would never talk about him.

"My great-grandfather is dead," she would reply. "I never knew him."

"Madman Hill! Madman Hill!" the boys would shout, laughing at her.

A thick-set boy named Ecker was the ring leader. He would say meaner things than the others, and would kick dirt at her.

"You'll be crazy, too," said Ecker. "You'll be another Madman Hill, running around looking for caves."

By this time Voileen felt tears rolling down her cheeks. She backed away from the big thick-set boy and wished she could run and hide in the *dravoth* marshes.

"Get away from me, you big-mouth," she cried.

Ecker turned to his troupe of followers and sneered, "See. I told you she's crazy. That's just the way crazy folks talk. Isn't it, Quanz? Isn't it, Moo?"

Most of the boys agreed. Some of them said their parents had told them about old Madman Hill and Voileen was just like him.

But one of the youngest boys, Hajjah, only a little older than Voileen

herself, suddenly stepped out in front of Ecker.

"You're a bully, Ecker." The smaller boy's eyes snapped with anger. "You've no right to call her crazy."

"Get out of my way." Ecker tried to brush him aside. "Who are you?"

Ecker's followers volunteered the information. This was Hajjah, the son of a *fandruff* herder. He was just starting to school.

"So you're coming to school. Do you think you'll learn anything? Maybe you'll learn to keep out of my way."

Ecker swung a fist at the smaller boy, who caught it on the cheekbone. All the boys laughed and gathered closer to Ecker to make sure they were on the right side. For a moment Hajjah rubbed his cheek. He glanced at Voileen, who was by this time quite terrified over the commotion she had caused.

"You'll learn to leave her alone." Hajjah spat the words fiercely. He flung his whole body into Ecker so suddenly that the larger boy was bounced off his feet.

Ecker sprang up as if he'd fallen on a hot stone. He reddened as the boys laughed at him, and grabbed Hajjah by the hair.

"You little mud fish." Ecker's right fist waved in front of the younger boy's eyes. "You go careful or I'll smash you. You must think Voileen is your girl."

"Maybe she is," Hajjah said defiantly.

"She's not," Ecker snarled. "If she's anyone's, she's mine. Aren't you, Voileen?"

With this inspiration, the bully released Hajjah and strode over to the girl, though she was shrinking away from him. He put his arm around her.

"You are my girl, aren't you?"

Voileen didn't look up at Ecker. Her frightened blue eyes were fastened on Hajjah, who glared fiercely at this bold stroke.

"I'm not anyone's girl," Voileen said.

"There," Ecker blustered, trying to regain his bravado. "She says she's my girl. You heard her, didn't you, Quanz? Didn't you, Moo?"

But the boys turned away and pretended to be interested in other things. And one of them, a little fat boy named Mooburkle, came over to Hajjah and said, "I'm on your side."

Meanwhile, Voileen squirmed out of Ecker's arms, instinctively realizing that his sudden pretense of friendship was only another taunt. She ran away and hid herself in the mountains and didn't return to school for a long time.

When she did come back, no one asked her if she'd been searching for caves like her legendary great-grandfather.

V

FROM RANDOLPH HILL'S NOTEBOOK: This is the strangest world I ever saw. I can't get over the feeling that I am in an enormous cathedral dome, lighted by a single enormous gas light hanging down in the center. Wherever I walk I find myself still at the bottom of this spherical enclosure. Any direction I look I see the land rising in concave walls, but I can't retain the illusion of climbing upward as I hike along. Always I seem to be at the bottom of this hollow planet, for the gravity draws me toward the ground with an even pull wherever I go. If I were standing at that point which is now my zenith, it would seem to be the bottom, no doubt, and I would look *straight up* toward this mountain where I am now perched. Though, of course, I wouldn't be able to see it, for there is too much haze to

see the top half of this dome.

Before I leave this realm I intend to walk all around it. The distance is said to be 377 *dunes*. Now that I am picking up a little of the language, I can translate units of time and distance into my own terms. The walk will require some fifty *winds* — roughly equivalent to forty or fifty Earth *days*. While the greatest circumference is 377 *dunes*, the travel route past mountains and lake will add up to all of 500 *dunes* (approximately 1750 Jupiterian *tazervs*, or nearly 1000 Earth *miles*.)

Food is scarce in this world. I'll take a supply of dried *fandruff* meat when I set out on the 500 *dune* journey. However, if the natives continue to prove hospitable, the undertaking won't be difficult. The upswing of the land makes it easy to pick a course. Roadcrossings, low-roofed houses, and open schools that are made of *dravoth* fences and look like stock pens—all these features lie in plain sight. For wherever there are lakes or *dravoth* marshes, villages will also be found.

Life is very quiet here. The natives live simply, and appear to be free from troubles.

VI

THE great-granddaughter of Randolph Hill had troubles aplenty. The fight between Hajjah and Ecker was only the beginning.

Ecker became a regular trouble maker for the younger boys like Hajjah and Mooburkle. Ecker would steal their food and divide it among the older boys. Food was scarce, and losing your dinner was no joke, though Ecker pretended he was only teasing, not really stealing.

Instinctively, Voileen grew to hate and fear him. Nevertheless, he was clever enough to bring himself back into her good graces when her anger demanded it. And at such times he would assert boldly that she was his girl, and the lowly sons of *fandruff* herders had better keep out of the way if they didn't want their eyes blackened.

There were black eyes aplenty as the seasons of schooling went on. Though Hajjah was much smaller, he made up in courage what he lacked in strength. The rivalry between him and Ecker grew tense and bitter.

But everyone knew that Hajjah was becoming a better fighter than Ecker.

"You'll whip him some day," Mooburkle would say. What Moo said, meant a lot to Hajjah and Voileen, even though Moo was funny-faced and fat, with a changing voice that resembled the bleat of a homesick *fandruff*.

Ecker was past the voice-changing stage now, and considered himself a man. Fights were childish; there were easier ways to get what you wanted than by fighting. Ecker's chums considered him brilliant, and they gloated to see what he could accomplish by cleverness. He could anger Voileen with taunts, then silence her anger with cunning compliments.

Sometimes he could even make her laugh at his mockery against Hajjah.

He could out-talk anyone in the school, and could recite the Laws of King Witfessal so accurately that he was a joy to his teachers.

But this season he had ceased to make slurs about Voileen's great-grandfather—and for good reason. The present teacher was none other than Voileen's *grandfather* — the son of the legendary Madman Hill.

This thin, spry, white-haired old gentleman, known to all the world as Teacher Crassie, could hypnotize a pen of school children with the slightest movement of his angular shoulders.

There was a keenness about his steel blue eyes; and when he called a class to their recitations of the Witfessal Laws, everyone sat alert.

Ecker and his bumptious friends kept themselves on good terms with Teacher Crassie. No one ever mentioned what everyone knew: that this noted scholar was the son of that mysterious, restless man who had spent his last years searching for lost caves, who had talked in strange accents, and had tried to disseminate crazy, dangerous ideas.

Teacher Crassie dealt with all his pupils impartially. When the last class of the season was over, Ecker and his friends were among those who stayed to listen to a special lecture. Not a lecture about the Laws of King Witfessal, but a discussion of secret knowledge which no one but Teacher Crassie possessed.

VII

FROM RANDOLPH HILL'S NOTEBOOK: This hollow planet, for all its serenity, is remarkably fascinating, even exciting in some respects, to an observer from the outside. These people consider themselves to be the only people in the universe. Indeed, this, to them, is the complete universe.

The name of this land, *Wanzuura,* is interpreted, "All of the world."

It is wonderfully simple to believe that all of everything is contained right here within these concave walls. A complete system of knowledge has been formulated, known as the Laws of King Witfessal. It explains all knowledge, the natives say, though most of them admit they need to brush up on their studies before trying to recite it.

I haven't met King Witfessal yet, and am dubious about my chances. I'm told that his favorite hangout for several seasons past has been that bluish-white cloud up in the center of the enclosed sky that furnishes the more or less constant daylight. There's no sky travel here; in fact, all travel is by foot or by *fandruff* cart over bumpy roads. (And I can't get over the delusions that it's always uphill.)

I'd like to send my respects to the King, if he's not a phony. But I have my suspicions. That bright cloud — miniature spiral nebula, or whatever it is — is sixty *dunes* overhead. And through my field glasses it looks like something hot.

VIII

THE tooth-and-nail fight took place near the footbridge on the road home from school. It began with a quarrel over the special lecture Teacher Crassie had given. Hajjah and some of the others had stopped to draw a map in the wet clay bank — a crude reproduction of the map Teacher Crassie had shown them.

"So you took it seriously!" Ecker hooted. He turned to Quanz and the others. "Look, fellows, Hajjah fell for it. He's planning to dig for another world."

"Maybe he didn't know Crassie was only joking," Quanz joined in. "All that silly talk about finding new sources of food — "

"We'd better give Haj some tools, so he and Moo can go to work."

Mooburkle gave an uncomfortable grunt. "Just because you fellows weren't smart enough to understand—"

"Don't waste any talk on them, Moo," Hajjah warned in a low voice, and went sketching lines in the mud.

"They don't have the brains of a *fandruff* calf," Moo mumbled.

"What'd you say?" Ecker snapped angrily.

"I don't hear any talk," Hajjah said

to Moo, paying no heed to the others. "All I hear is the wind."

"It's an evil sounding wind," said Moo. "It smells — "

A hard kick sent Mooburkle sprawling in the mud. His fat body struck with a smack, but he bounded up and his fists were loaded. He let fly a gob of mud that caught Ecker full on the chest.

On the instant, Ecker's three companions hurled themselves into the fray with flying fists. Mooburkle beat a swift retreat across the marsh, and Hajjah found himself the first line of defense.

"Let me have him," Ecker roared, swaggering toward Hajjah. "I've been waiting for this."

Hajjah didn't wait for the attack. He leaped straight for his old enemy. The other boys made way for him and he plunged headlong like a battering ram and knocked Ecker off his feet.

"What's the matter with you fellows?" Ecker gasped. "A fine bunch of friends. Grab him!"

Hajjah's fists were swinging. They caught the first two chargers for square blows. They staggered back. But Quanz made a hard dive for his feet, and he reeled. Again Ecker came at him, and again a flying gob of mud smacked him.

Fists, flying mud, roaring voices, slaps and bites and hair-pulling — and all at once Hajjah found himself locked within three pairs of arms that held him while Ecker swung fists at his cheeks.

Things began to swim in blackness. One of his eyes had swollen shut, the other fell closed as his consciousness ebbed. But he could still hear Ecker's voice.

"This will take care of you for some time."

"You're wrong, Ecker," Hajjah gasped as he dropped to the ground.

Then he heard a sharp authoritative voice that could be no one in the world but Teacher Crassie. And there were sounds of footsteps pounding down the road.

When he managed to look up he saw that Ecker and the other three were chasing off toward the roadcrossing. Standing above him were Crassie and Voileen.

"That's how it happened," the girl was saying to her grandfather, having described the trouble from the start. "I was hiding in the marshes and saw."

"So you took my talk seriously." Teacher Crassie looked down at Hajjah, and his steel blue eyes might have been seeing visions. "Come, Hajjah. You and Voileen will go back to my house with me. I've something to show you."

A wail came from the marshes where Mooburkle stood thigh-deep in the mud.

"What about me? I'm stuck."

"Excellent," said Teacher Crassie. "Stay right where you are till Hajjah comes back."

IX

RANDOLPH HILL'S NOTEBOOK: These simple people don't seem to realize that their food resources are terribly low. They are living on the ragged edges of starvation, apparently without knowing it. *Dravoth* is the staple. There is no other vegetable of any consequence, for *dravoth* grows wherever there is any soil. Along the marshes it grows to a height of ten or twelve feet with pulpy stalks much thicker than corn. These fertile spots are usually fenced off — with fences built of dried dravoth stalks — to keep the fandruffs from grazing it down. The fandruffs live entirely on the scrubby dravoth that tries to grow in the hills.

Boiled dravoth leaves are about as

tempting as bluegrass soup, and the roots are as tasty as elm bark. The only luxury in foods is fish, and from all indications there is grave danger that the fish will soon be gone. This little world holds approximately a million people. The normal increase in population is due to bring about a famine.

X

VOILEEN supposed she knew all about her grandfather Crassie. But here was a surprise.

Teacher Crassie removed an ornamental dravoth mat from the wall and there was a door. Beyond this wall, Voileen had supposed, was a bank of mountain against which this house had been built.

Crassie opened the door and the three of them walked along a narrow passage. It was so low that even Voileen, the shortest of the three, kept getting her hair wet on the drops of water that clung to the ceiling.

"I dug this tunnel myself," said the old grandfather proudly. "See. We are going down."

Voileen rememered that her father had often scoffed at Crassie because his hands were worn and crusty.

"I dig a little each night," said Crassie. "Now, I am far enough to know that the pull upon us grows greater as we come farther down. Yet there is so little difference that I could never convince your father — "

"Does father know about this?" Voileen asked.

"He would never admit to anyone that he knows. I tried to enlist his aid, but Nome has his own life to live, and he was afraid of ridicule." Crassie turned to Hajjah. "Not many people would care to share my beliefs if it might cost them a beaten face."

In the yellow torchlight, Voileen could see that Hajjah's face, for all its bruises, was on fire with interest.

"How far," Hajjah asked, "must you dig to reach a new world?"

"Very far. No one knows."

"But the King's Laws don't tell us that tunnels can be dug," said Voileen.

"And so I do not teach it," said her grandfather with a sly twinkle. "But school is over now, and I am talking only to two confidential friends."

"How could it be?" Hajjah asked.

The teacher shook his head slowly. "I do not know. If we want to know, we should dig. The laws are good, of course."

"Won't we get in trouble, talking such things?" Voileen asked.

"Perhaps you favor your father instead of me," said Crassie.

But Voileen shook her head. "I'll never tell him I've been here. . . . Can we go farther?"

XI

FROM RANDOLPH HILL'S NOTEBOOK: It's time I found my way out of this world. People are getting suspicious of me. I can't help making friends with some of them. But it wouldn't do to expose my secret — that I'm from another world. It would upset their whole existence.

But my unorthodox remarks give my friends a lot of trouble. For example, my suggestion that the lakes ought to be restocked before the fish are all gone, and that someone ought to start a fish hatchery. My listeners were horrified. The King's Laws wouldn't allow anyone to interfere with the private lives of fish! So that's that.

XII

HILL'S NOTEBOOK: I should have come a century or so earlier and

met this chap Witfessal. He must have had an oversized brain, from all the mathematical laws he invented. They still call him the King, but no one sees him because he stays at home — up in the "King's Cloud" that gives off all the light. So they say.

Guess there's no reason for him to come down and talk things over, because all his answers are already down in black and white. And most of them are good, as far as they go. He couldn't have improved on his timing of the Winds (which correspond to Days) if he had had a stopwatch and a slide rule. It's good enough as it stands.

His laws on the succession of dark seasons and light seasons are also highly accurate. That spiral nebula keeps turning slowly, and it has a dark side. The dark period brings rain and storms. The dark and light periods are the two seasons, and taken together comprise a year.

XIII

HILL'S NOTEBOOK: When I leave this hollow planet I must take a copy of the Laws. I'm learning to read the stuff. The Witfessal Agents would be shocked to death if they knew I was reading it for the first time. Their business is to check up. It's everyone's civic duty to study the Laws.

When a Witfessal Agent calls, you have to report on how much studying you've done. You also pay a fee to the Agent. Technically, this fee is a donation to the treasury of King Witfessal, but in reality the Agent keeps it. After all he can't afford to go around collecting money for the King unless he's paid for his trouble.

Agents are usually men whose land has ceased to grow dravoth, or whose fandruffs have all died. They're an interesting lot, always well primed with quotations from the King's Law and with gossip from the neighboring road-crossings (villages).

If I don't find that lost cave within another wind or two, the rains will begin and I'll be sitting here for another season.

XIV

HILL'S NOTEBOOK: If I don't get out of this planet soon, I'll find myself going mad or getting married, I'm not sure which. But I can't live in this lost world much longer.

XV

HILL'S NOTEBOOK: Will probably stay for three or four more seasons, until Crassie gets a little older. Before I leave, must make sure he and his mother are well provided for.

XVI

A NEW season was at hand. The dark cloud bank moved away. The wet gray rocks in the pasture turned glistening white with light from the King's Cloud.

Hajjah's fandruffs poked their heads out from under the protecting cliff and discovered that the rains were over. The calves went chasing down the hillside, and the older beasts trudged off toward the greenest dravoth patches to resume their grazing.

Hajjah looked toward the concave landscape where a lone figure was walking down the road.

"A Witfessal Agent," Hajjah said, when he was sure he could distinguish the blue robe the traveler was wearing. "But he won't call on me. I'm too far off the road."

There had been very few visitors to this grazing region during the dark sea-

son, other than members of Hajjah's own family who came to bring him supplies of food.

Once, Mooburkle had come to pay his respects and deliver a load of personal gossip. Moo had almost joined a company of traveling players, who wanted a short, fat, comedy actor.

But Moo had changed his mind upon learning that Ecker had a share in the company. The traveling players could do without a short, fat, funny man, as far as Moo was concerned.

Once, Voileen had come.

She had promised to come often, in spite of her father.

"Doesn't Nome want you to see me?" Hajjah had asked.

"Nome doesn't even know you. But I told him you were herding," Voileen had replied.

"Is there anything wrong with that?"

"Nome has peculiar ideas, you know — even if he is my father. He and grandfather Crassie never agree on what I should do. Nome hopes I will sometime marry a Witfessal Agent. Or perhaps an actor. But not a herder whose clothes are full of the smell of fandruffs."

"I like the smell of fandruffs, Leenie," Hajjah had said.

And Voileen had responded, "I like whatever you like, Haj."

It was ever present in Hajjah's mind that there was a bond between him and Voileen. It was the bond of secrecy which had been formed that day Crassie took them down into the tunnel.

It was also a bond of friendship and faith in each other — something never to be talked about except when they were together. It made them members of a little secret society for two — or three, counting Crassie.

Voileen had promised to come back often, and before departing she had let Hajjah press his face close against hers in a token of love.

But she had not returned; and Hajjah could not imagine why.

If only Mooburkle would come again — or someone — so that Haj could leave his herd and hike to Crassie's house, two roadcrossings away —

Now, Hajjah gazed longingly toward the road. That bluerobed Witfessal Agent was indeed coming toward him. A ray of hope — an idea — perhaps the Agent would herd the fandruffs for a short time.

Or could a Witfessal Agent be trusted with a herd of fandruffs?

XVII

"YOU are Hajjah?"

"Yes."

"You know by my blue robe that I have come in the name of King Witfessal." The Agent's words were a practiced speech which required no gestures, no expressions of friendliness. The authority of the blue robe was introduction enough for any such officer. "Which sections of the King's Law have you studied since you were last visited?"

"I didn't bring any copy of the Law," said Hajjah, "but I have recited my memorized sections many times."

The Witfessal Agent made a written record of Hajjah's accomplishments and continued with the matter of contributions to the treasury.

That detail taken care of, the Agent launched an admonition for more study and memorizing.

"You were a classmate of Ecker, were you not?"

"Yes," said Hajjah.

"Ecker has made a splendid record since leaving school. No one in all this row of roadcrossings has studied and memorized so faithfully as he."

The Agent waited as if to make sure

that Hajjah was duly impressed. Then his manner grew stern.

"Hajjah, I have been told that you were one of those who listened to the blasphemies of Crassie."

"Blasphemies?"

"Certain words of Crassie are not in harmony with the Laws, and you must know it."

"Who has been talking to you?" Hajjah's anger was suddenly shooting to his fingertips. His fists wanted to clench.

"I have talked with Nome. He has been made the assistant to Mombal, High Servant of the King."

"Nome! Voileen's father — "

"Nome is aware of the danger of Crassie's teachings. He fears for his own daughter — "

"Where is Voileen? Have you seen her?"

"Her father has forbidden her to see you, Hajjah," said the Agent.

"But she wasn't living with her father," Hajjah blurted. "He was too strict. She was with Crassie — "

"Her father intends to get her away from all the old influences of Madman Hill," the Agent said. "He was able to place her with a respected company of traveling players — Ecker's troupe."

XVIII

HILL'S NOTEBOOK: Other than reading the Laws, these people have little to do for amusement or diversion. However, they do have a few public entertainments that might be classed as drama.

The plays are staged by little bands of actors who travel from roadcrossing to roadcrossing. They require no stage, very little scenery. All they need is a clearing wide enough for the audience to gather around in a semicircle. A few dravoth screens enable the players to make entrances and exits.

The sad plays are funny and the funny ones are sad. After you've seen three or four you've seen them all, since they follow well beaten trails.

One of the themes is starvation. It invariably ends when the hero, after marching away to starve to death, remembers to recite the Witfessal Laws, and then comes home with a bag of fish or an unclaimed fandruff. These starvation plays aren't too popular, because of the smell. The actors must hold onto the same dead fish all season.

Another theme concerns messages from King Witfessal. According to the plays — which are the only record of hollow planet history other than the written Laws — the great King will sometimes whisper fresh tidbits of knowledge into the ears of some Agent or fandruff herder who has been studying his Laws conscientiously. The audiences like to see these revelations dramatized.

Both of the above themes are on the serious side.

For their comedies they capitalize on lightning and thunder and sudden death. Why it's funny is more than I can say. The typical play in this vein will depict a weaver who is on his way home from work with an armload of ornamental skin garments. He chances to find a garment that someone has left lying on the ground. He picks it up. Then he meets another weaver, who is surprised to see him carrying so many garments. The second weaver says to the first, "Are they all yours?"

And the first weaver says, "They're all mine. I made them all myself."

Whereupon the lightning strikes him dead — and the crowd howls with laughter.

Then the second weaver picks up the first weaver's garments and adds them to his own. Sure enough, he meets

someone who asks if they are all his.

And sure enough the second fool weaver answers, "They're all mine. I made them all myself."

Then the lightning strikes him dead — and the spectators howl their heads off.

Where such a theme originated, I haven't been able to learn. There is very little lightning and thunder in this enclosed world. But no doubt there have been deaths from lightning at some time in the distant past.

XIX

HAJJAH and Mooburkle waited until the crowd had gathered in a closely packed semicircle. The first play was about to start.

Hajjah didn't want to be noticed. From his recent talk with the Witfessal Agent, he knew that rumors were spreading.

Somehow the word had gotten around that Teacher Crassie had actually begun to dig into the ground for another world. Crassie, the profound teacher, of all persons!

Could it be that Teacher Crassie had fallen victim to his father's malady?

Hajjah and Moo edged closer. The drama was on. It was a tragedy of starvation.

Each time a new actor emerged from behind the screen, Hajjah was sure it would be Voileen — but he was always wrong.

When the first play ended, Moo volunteered to slip around to the rear of the screens to see if she was there. Soon he reported back. No Voileen. She wasn't with the troupe after all.

"But Ecker is back there," Moo said. "And a man all dressed up for the next play, with big ears and a funny face."

"The second play," said Hajjah, "is something Ecker has written. I heard someone say so."

A moment later the announcement was made by one of the actors. Here was the new comedy everyone was talking about, written by a new actor named Ecker. The play was called *A Pile of Dirt*, and the leading man was Ecker, himself.

XX

IF THE play had been by anyone but Ecker, Hajjah would have roared with laughter along with the rest of the crowd.

The first appearance was funny — so funny that Moo, fairly splitting his fat sides, evidently lost all sight of the real purpose of the play.

One actor was made up to look tall and thin. He wore shaggy hair, a huge clay nose, and wide ears. The first thing he did was to stop and gaze at the audience, open-mouthed.

He gazed and began wiggling his big arched eyebrows. That was wonderfully funny, and from that moment forward the audience was right with him.

Next he unhooked some small metal tools from the shoulders of his baggy yellow robe — a pick and a spade.

He began to dig.

At once, a man in ordinary dress walked up to him and asked what he was doing.

"I'm going to dig," said the funny man.

For the next few moments he dug laboriously, without succeeding in unearthing more than a few spoonfuls of earth. All at once he began to droop. He handed the extra tool to the man who stood watching him.

"You dig."

They both dug. Then they both began to droop, and the second man said, "What are we digging for?"

"To find another Wanzuura."

"How much farther do we have to dig?"

"I'll go ask an Agent. Keep digging."

The funny man walked off. The other man mopped his forehead, and laid down his tools. He glanced to one side as if he saw someone coming. Then he hung up a big sign.

"EACH MAN HELP DIG . . . WE WILL FIND A NEW WANZUURA."

One man after another came past and each stopped to help dig.

When the skinny man with the big ears came back he measured to see how deep the hole was. Not deep enough to hide his big feet.

After considerable argument among the various diggers, and absurd explanations from the funny man, a new character entered the group — Ecker, in the garb of a Witfessal Agent.

A hush of quiet came over everyone — actors and audience alike.

"There is no other Wanzuura," said Ecker, the Witfessal Agent, in a solid, convincing voice.

He removed the sign and hung up a wide thin mat of woven dravoth.

"Watch me," Ecker said to the funny-faced slim man, who in turn told the audience, "Watch him," with a wiggling of eyebrows and ears that made everyone laugh.

Ecker took a knife and cut a circle in the center of the mat.

"That is our Wanzuura. All around it is solid rock."

"How do you know?"

"There it is, all around us." Ecker made a sweeping gesture toward the surrounding landscape.

The clown looked around at the real world, and nodded with his oversized ears and eyebrows. But he whirled back to the map and pointed to a spot an arm's length from the circle.

"Maybe there's another world down here?"

"Let's imagine there is." Ecker cut a second circle. The two circles were an arm's length apart. "So you're going to dig to find it."

THE funny man blinked while Ecker made dozens of lines out from the center circle. Not one of them went toward the second world. He drove the point home.

"You may dig in any direction. But what do you strike? Rock and more rock. Are you likely to hit this other world?"

The clown glanced to the ground where he had recently been digging. He gulped and looked at the audience questioningly. Everyone hooted — except Hajjah.

"Let me show you something else," said Ecker. "How long does it take you to walk around our Wanzuura?"

"I wouldn't walk; I'd ride," the clown said brightly.

"All right, you mount your fandruff and you can ride around in fifty winds."

"Not on my fandruff."

"What's the matter, is your fandruff sick?"

"He's dead."

"All right, get back on your feet. You can walk around in fifty winds. But if you were going to dig a ditch around, it would take you fifty winds to get from here to the hill."

"If my friends helped?"

"It would take a hundred winds if you depend on them."

"I'll dig it myself."

"If you dig for another world it'll take all your life, and your son's and your grandson's. In a thousand seasons," said Ecker with a supercilious smile, "your descendants might get this far." He drew a line straight out from the center circle.

The funny man squealed like a fandruff calf caught in a fence.

"What's the matter?" Ecker barked.

"You're digging in the wrong direction. There's no world out there. It's down here." He pointed to the circle in the corner. "I should dig *this* way."

He fitted his arm to the angle on the map to catch the direction. He pointed to the ground, grabbed a tool and started digging like mad, keeping his eyes glued on the chosen angle.

"Stop it!" Ecker yelled.

"Wrong way again?"

"There isn't any right way."

"But I thought you said — "

"I was simply showing you: *If* there was — but we know there isn't. Go home and read your Witfessal Laws."

"What'll I do with all that hole I dug?"

The funny man and Ecker both looked back at the heap of loosened dirt. Just then an imitation fandruff entered. It was two men under a robe, the front man wearing an imitation fandruff head with long ungainly horns.

The mock-beast gave the excavation a serious look, and proceeded to kick the dirt and rocks back into it.

Everyone howled.

The funny man scratched his ear, and said, "Soak me with rain. That fandruff's smarter than I am."

And that was the end.

XXI

THE loud cheering fanned the flames of Hajjah's rage. His fists clenched and he breathed hard.

"Don't do anything," Moo whispered. "The people are all on his side. This is no time to start a row."

"I'll get him alone," Hajjah snapped. "He's not going on with this play."

"Wait, Haj. Think it over."

"Every word was a slap at Crassie — and Voileen — and us. I'll not have it."

"What are you going to do?"

"Listen, Moo," Hajjah breathed tensely. "You go to Ecker. Tell him someone wants to see him over by the bridge. He won't know it's me. He hasn't seen me — "

"Not by the bridge, Haj," Mooburkle warned, glancing at Hajjah's cheek. A thin scar had adorned that cheek since the last meeting at the bridge. "He'll know it's you. He'll bring some fellows to help him — "

"By the school pen, then. He'll think it's Voileen. Tell him to come alone."

Their whispered plans were interrupted by an announcement from the center of the improvised stage. Two honored guests were present. They must rise and speak.

The first distinguished person was Nome. He rose and made a few careful statements about the quality of the dramatic performance.

To Hajjah, his words were too colorless for notice. Hajjah was already boiling with outraged feelings, and the appearance of Nome had no soothing effect. On the contrary, the honored guest's manner was distinctly irritating.

So this was Voileen's father. No wonder she had preferred to live with her grandfather. Nome's every word or motion was an exhibition of severe precision. He was so correct that he repelled.

Hajjah guessed that such a nature was a rebound from Crassie and Madman Hill. This man had no stomach for the criticisms that had been hurled at his radical grandfather.

Hajjah scowled his undefined hatred toward this man.

The final guest to appear before the assembly was no other than Mombal, himself, the High Servant of the King.

Hajjah recognized the blue and red robes as this important little old creature slipped quietly through the murmuring crowd to stand before them.

Mombal was entitled to wear the most princely of costumes, for no person in all Wanzuura was as important as he. (Excepting the legendary King Witfessal, himself.) The Agents who worked with Mombal knew him to be the most stubborn defender of the Law in all the realm.

In spite of his power and his position, not many people knew him except as a quiet little old mystic who always attended public functions and somehow gave an impression of being wise and mysterious.

Mombal praised the drama in customary superlatives.

"I wish to give my personal thanks to the young man who wrote this excellent play. It has taught a lesson that no one can forget."

Then Ecker appeared, to receive handsome approbations from the lips of this high official.

"Look at him!" Hajjah whispered hoarsely. "See how he gloats. That face won't be so pretty when I get through."

"You don't dare," Moo warned doggedly. "After these words from Mombal, you can't. People will hate you. Can't you see, Ecker's made a hero of himself — "

"Have him meet me alone," Hajjah repeated. "Come on, we'd better get out of the paths before the meeting breaks up."

They scouted away and circled the crowd until they reached the footbridge. There they parted. Mooburkle went back toward the stage. Hajjah hurried on to lie in wait near the deserted school yard.

XXII

HILL'S NOTEBOOK: My boy 'Crassie' is growing up to be a scholar. He and a friend named Mombal study and play together, and I predict that both boys will some day become persons of importance.

I broke my rule of strict secrecy and allowed Crassie and Mombal the privilege of looking through my field glasses, and they were amazed. I've promised to give Crassie the glasses again some day.

But this confidence is an exception. All my secret preparations for leaving I keep to myself. Progressing rapidly.

XXIII

HAJJAH'S heart pounded like rocks thumping together. Through the cracks in the pen of dravoth stalks he could see Ecker coming. Ecker and Moo — they were alone!

At last, thought Hajjah, accounts would be squared.

From another road he could hear the passing talk of persons returning home from the play. What a splendid moral that funny play had contained, they were saying. However, taking liberties with the Witfessal Laws was no joking matter. They would like to see harsh punishment for anyone who tried it.

Out of the welter of talk, Hajjah once heard the name of Crassie mentioned.

But Hajjah shut his ears to these rumblings of trouble. Ecker was coming . . . Ecker was crossing the footbridge . . . Ecker was taking the shortcut through the patch of tall dravoth . . . Ecker was only a stone's throw away.

"Hajjah! Hajjah! Come quick!"

Hajjah whirled around. The surprise call shot chills through him. The boy was running toward him, calling breathlessly.

"Hurry, Hajjah! Voileen wants you to come. Teacher Crassie is dying!"

This boy was the son of the Agent who cared for the sick ones. Voileen

had sent him.

"My father has done all he can do," the boy panted. "Voileen has been helping. But now Crassie knows he will die. And he wants to talk with you — and Mombal — and Nome, if Nome will come — "

"You'll find them in yonder crowd," Hajjah yelled. He was already off on a dead run down the road. He called back over his shoulder, "Tell Moo where I've gone!"

XXIV

HAJJAH found Voileen waiting in the doorway of Crassie's house. She threw her arms around him eagerly.

"Father won't come, I'm sure," she said. "But you've come. Crassie will be pleased.'

"I've missed you terribly," said Hajjah. He studied her face, trying to read the deep trouble it held. "Crassie—has it happened suddenly?"

"He's been ill all through the past season. At first I thought he was pretending so I wouldn't have to join Ecker's actors. I didn't guess he was so near the end. He tells me I mustn't feel sad. And I mustn't worry, even if Nome does try to claim me again."

"Let me claim you instead, Leenie." He drew her close in his arms.

"We'll talk of that later, Haj . . . I'll tell grandfather you're here."

She left him waiting in the outer room.

The moments were filled with whirling thoughts. It was hard to adjust to such a shock.

To Hajjah this was more than the tragedy of the death of a friend. It was the passing of a source of visions, knowledge, hope.

What secrets of mind lay hidden within the body of Crassie no one would ever know. Soon that body would be a dead thing, changing to dust, and the mysteries that dwelt there — where would they go?

Hajjah's thoughts could not get past that question.

Where would Crassie's knowledge *go?*

Naturally enough, Hajjah sought an answer in terms of the great King Witfessal, whose knowledge was supposed to be supreme. Somehow it seemed wrong for Crassie to die without handing his knowledge over to the King, so that it would still be here, for everyone to see and understand.

"He's ready to see you, Hajjah," Voileen called softly.

Together he and Voileen entered the old man's room and stood before the heap of dravoth mats that formed his bed.

"Hajjah!"

The old man's whisper was barely audible. It was like the dying wind.

"Again we three are together," Hajjah said, "You and Leenie and I."

"Soon it will be . . . only you and Leenie . . . But you love her, Hajjah."

"Very much," Hajjah said, and he knelt with Voileen at the low bedside. "I'll always love her."

"Do." The dying face was smiling. "She is lovely . . . Her laughter . . . The spring of her step . . . You'll always love her."

"Always."

FOR a few moments Crassie was silent. Wisps of his long white hair that draped over the edge of the low bed trembled with the slow rhythm of his breathing. Almost gone was the glint of life in his steel blue eyes, deep under the folds of his drooping lids.

"Hajjah . . . Leenie."

"Yes, grandfather," Voileen breathed.

"I want you to know . . ."

"We are listening, Teacher Crassie."

"There *is* another world . . . with other life . . . other kings . . . and food . . . somewhere . . . if you dig on . . . and on . . . Do you *believe* me, Hajjah? . . . Leenie?"

Hajjah's lips tightened. The question was like an unexpected jab from a sharp sword. *Did* he believe? It was one thing to be willing to search for a new world, ready to be convinced *if* it could be found; but quite another thing to take that new world on faith, when, in reality, no one had ever seen it.

Hajjah thought of Ecker's play—the clown with the big ears who had less sense than a fandruff.

"Do you believe me?" the old man repeated. "Do you believe *enough . . . to go on digging?*"

Hajjah glanced at Voileen. She was shrinking from the challenge, and her wide blue eyes were full of fear. Was she, too, thinking of Ecker and Mombal, and the people who had called her great-grandfather crazy?

"Yes, Teacher Crassie," Hajjah answered quickly. "We believe what you tell us. And we'll go on—"

Voileen's fingers tightened on his arm, trying to arrest him before he blurted any bold pledge. But Hajjah had plunged.

"We'll go on, Teacher Crassie, digging—"

"Then I'll tell you . . . a secret . . . before I go."

He paused. His breathing grew fainter. Perhaps he didn't hear the light footsteps from another room. But Hajjah heard; and he and Voileen turned to see the bright red and blue robes at the doorway. Mombal, the High Servant of the King had come.

Mombal held back hesitantly, as if waiting for an invitation to join them. But now the dying man's lips were moving again, revealing that secret that was meant only for the ears of Hajjah and Voileen.

"Before I go . . . I entrust you . . . with something that no one knows . . . My father—"

"Yes?" Voileen gasped, leaning close.

"My father," Crassie's whisper came strong like the last bright flicker of a candle, "was not born . . . in our Wanzuura . . . He *came . . . came* here . . . f r o m another Wan . . . Wanzuura . . . another world!"

"Hush, grandfather!" V o i l e e n blurted.

"What is it, Leenie?"

"Mombal has come. He's here. He *heard!*"

"Mombal," Crassie breathed the word with a warmth of feeling. "Mombal must keep . . . my secret . . . You will . . . won't you, Mombal?"

The slight lift of Crassie's fingers invited the old friend to come. Hajjah and Voileen stepped back while the two aged men had their last words together.

How curious, Hajjah thought that these two had remained friends to the last, though their lives and their beliefs were as far apart as the opposite poles of Wanzuura.

Now Crassie spoke of the gift he had saved for Mombal.

The little old mystic found the package on the shelf and returned to the bedside so that Crassie could be sure. When the dying man had pressed his fingers against the dravoth leaf wrappings, and had heard this old friend's softly spoken thanks he smiled his last smile.

Teacher Crassie closed his eyes to invite the final sleep.

DARKNESS was over the road-crossings of this valley. Rains

spattered down on the lakes until their surfaces were only bleak, gray masses of steam.

Hajjah could see the dim outlines of the lake road, which he watched anxiously. Soon they would be coming—Voïleen, her sister, and Moo, and all the other friends who were faithful enough to brave the rains—and the scornful words of the people.

Hajjah was hiding in a shed only a few steps from the entrance of Crassie's house. The fandruff calves were huddled under the leaky roof of this shed, and the air was strong with their odors. The dumb beasts gawked at Hajjah as if sensing there was something unnatural in his being here, clinging to the walls with such caution.

Over the sounds of falling rain Hajjah could hear the men talking. There were three of them, hard-bitten old herders, stationed in the entranceway of Crassie's house—waiting for trouble.

Trouble had multiplied swiftly since the passing of Crassie. The presence of these men testified to that. And so did their talk. Hajjah could hear nearly every word.

"I don't think three of us are needed," one of them said. "One man could guard this house. It seems to me these Agents and Ecker and Nome are taking matters all too seriously."

"Don't you realize," said another, "that Hajjah and his friends plan to come here with tools and try to finish what Crassie started?"

"Maybe. But I can't see us having to chase them away with clubs. We'll just tell them the house is closed; that they can't come in. That will be the end of it. I don't think that young Hajjah is such a bad boy."

"Ecker says he's vicious."

"How could he be? He's the son of Zimluff, the herder. He was a good scholar, and I've never known him to desert his herding or lose a fandruff in a storm."

"Ecker says he was the worst one of all for listening to Crassie. He's the one who has organized this party to go on with the digging."

"Why not let him dig? He'll tire out soon enough."

The herder discovered upon uttering these statements that he had earned resentment from both the other guards. Hajjah, taking it all in, could readily understand why.

"You astound me, saying such things," said the man who had stood up for Ecker.

And the third man who had been sitting silent, trimming a dravoth staff with a meat knife laid his work down on the step and slowly rose.

"I agree with Grannz," said the staff whittler. "This loose talk has gone far enough. We all know, if we study our Law that it would be bad—very bad—for anyone to believe there was another world."

The more liberal of the three tried to defend himself, but he had made a weak stand. He had to admit, when the argument drove him into a corner, that the very act of digging—or even talking of digging—was a sinful admission that there might be something outside the Law.

"Exactly," said Ecker's friend. "The very thought is blasphemy. It's good that we have young men like Ecker. His play has pointed the way. But if these young rascals persist, and violence becomes necessary we must be ready. Otherwise, the coming generations might fall victim to a sweeping storm of doubt."

"I agree with Grannz," said the staff whittler. "We should be ready for violence." He picked up his knife and the shaft of dravoth and resumed work.

FOR a time the talk quieted, and the herder who had spoken up for Hajjah had a chance to think over his errors. Soon he must have decided to fall in line with the others, for Hajjah heard him say, "You're right, it is blasphemy."

But evidently he wasn't satisfied to let the matter rest without some further questions.

"I hate to see Hajjah get in trouble, but he's bringing it on himself, I suppose. What he should have done was to go to Mombal, the High Servant of the King and explain—"

"He did go to Mombal," said Grannz. "Mombal forbade him to talk of other worlds."

"Then he organized his party after he was forbidden?"

"He did. And they have been holding meetings. Ecker tried to attend one of them but he wasn't admitted."

"Hajjah—a bad boy," the troubled herder said. "Hajjah, the son of Zimluff."

"But with the madness of Madman Hill," said Ecker's friend. "Madness doesn't always pass from father to son. Sometimes it jumps across barriers, like one lake overflowing into another."

Again there was silence. But the troubled herder tried once more to settle his feelings toward the son of Zimluff, the herder.

"If it is true," he said, "that young Hajjah has openly defied the Law with blasphemies—"

"It *is* true," Ecker's friend interrupted. "He has even asked if there might not be another world with more fish to banish our hunger!"

"More fish!" the whittler echoed. "As if King Witfessal would let us need more fish."

"If it is true that Hajjah has said such things," the troubled herder repeated, "why have the thunder and lightning not struck him down?"

The other two men glared anger at their questioner. Such a question was almost blasphemy in itself; King Witfessal would strike with lightning when it was deserved.

"It may come," Ecker's friend said in a low impressive voice. "It—may—come."

Hajjah strained to hear what was said after that. For the whittler, laying down the dravoth staff, imparted his words with an air of great confidence.

"I have heard something from Ecker's own lips that he hasn't told you, Grannz. *Ecker expects lightning and thunder.*"

"But by what right can he expect it?"

"Remember, my friends, that Ecker is upright and strong and keen. He has had the praise of many Witfessal Agents. He has talked with Mombal. He breathes the Laws."

"Has King Witfessal spoken to him in a dream?"

"Perhaps. Or perhaps it is only Ecker's insight into right and wrong as it affects Hajjah—and Voileen."

"The granddaughter of Crassie?"

"Yes. I am told that her goodness is in the balance," said the whittler. "But Ecker is sure that he can save her from this storm of evil—if the King should visit lightning upon Hajjah."

XXVI

HAJJAH trembled to hear these awful words.

He was an outcast. And so recently had it all happened, he could hardly realize it.

He was an organizer of a band of blasphemers. Though he hadn't wished to defy Mombal, there was his promise to Crassie—and Crassie's promise to

him. There was another world—a world of plenty—waiting to be found.

But now the full impact of his trouble came to him through these voices in the rain. While the thunder was roaring. While he was waiting for his friends to come to help him launch the task that Crassie had left for him.

But the thunder died away, and clouds grew lighter.

And when Hajjah's friends came, gathering with him in the shed out of sight of Ecker's three guards, they were still fired with the same hope and zeal that Hajjah had given them at their last meeting.

And so there was no thought of backing up. Yet the burden of this awful sin was already more weighty than any digging tools could be.

"Are we all here?" Hajjah asked.

"I'll count," said Mooburkle. "Shall I count the fandruff calves, too?"

Voileen was at Hajjah's side; a sister had come with her. Moo had brought Bolt, his small brother. There were four others, friends who had used to come from across the mountains to attend Teacher Crassie's school. They, like Hajjah and Moo, were full-grown young men, toughened to hard work.

The party's enthusiasm was temporarily dampened because of the three stubborn guards who waited in their path. There was no way to enter Crassie's tunnel except through the house.

"It's my grandfather's house, and we have a right to go in," Voileen asserted angrily.

"Ecker must have known our plans," said Moo, with an air of gloom. "We're stuck."

"What can I tell those men, Haj, so they'll let us in?" Voileen asked.

"We can't get past them with kindness," Hajjah whispered. "There's no use to try. And there's no use wasting our strength fighting when we'll need it for digging. But I have a plan."

His comrades gathered around. They knew Haj would have a plan.

"If we can trick them into leaving their posts for a moment, we can get into the tunnel without their knowing it. They'll return to keep watch, and they'll never hear us working down there."

Hajjah knew his plan wasn't free from dangers, but the party was eager to take whatever risk was necessary. They had come through wet weather, and they meant to see something accomplished.

Bolt was small and wiry and swift on foot, so he volunteered to spring the trick.

While the others waited in the fandruff shed, only a few steps from their destination, Bolt slipped around unseen to another shed a little distance down the road. There he was to strike a fire with dry dravoth sticks.

SOON the blazes of dravoth torches showed through the loosely constructed walls of the distant shed. From all appearances, the shed was burning.

The three guards saw it and bounced into action. As they chased down the road toward it, Hajjah and his party silently slipped into the house.

"No one saw us," Voileen breathed.

Hajjah removed the dravoth mat from a wall of the inner room, opened the hidden door, and guided his party safely into the black tunnel. They moved on, well out of hearing of the house, before he allowed them to strike dravoth torches or converse above a whisper.

Then Hajjah scurried back to the tunnel doorway and watched through the cracks in the mat to see if Bolt would come.

Moments of waiting grew long.

"Haven't you seen him yet?" Moo

whispered, extinguishing a torch as he returned to the entrance.

"The guards haven't come back," said Hajjah. "They must be chasing him."

"I'd better go find him. He's only a schoolboy. They might make him tell."

"Don't cross them, Moo," Hajjah warned. "They're full of Ecker's ideas. I heard them talking. One of them had a club—"

"If they lay a stroke on Bolt, I'll—"

"Ssssh. They're coming. They're *bringing* him—in their arms! Ecker's with them."

XXVII

FROM the rear side of the damp-smelling dravoth screen that hid the tunnel doorway, Hajjah and Moo could see through the house to the roadway by which the men were returning.

"What's the matter?" came the whisper of Voileen, a short distance down the tunnel.

She hurried up to Hajjah. Then, catching sight of the men bearing the limp form of Bolt in their arms, she raced back into the darkness to call the rest of the party.

Hajjah could hear the dull echoes of tools dropping and feet bounding toward him. The whole party joined Hajjah and Moo at the screen. From this vantage point they watched, unseen. But Hajjah bade them hush their whispers.

"Listen to them. They're disagreeing—"

The first voice they heard was that of Grannz, the herder who had earlier voiced his staunch support of Ecker.

"You shouldn't have hit him so hard, Jobwot. That club you had was too heavy—"

"*Who* hit him? Not I," Jobwot flared with anger. He was the herder who had taken such pains with the trimming of a dravoth staff.

"Then how did he get hurt?"

"I didn't see it happen," Jobwot snarled. "Ecker grabbed the staff away from me—"

"Ecker!"

"Just as the boy got loose from you and chased out of the shed, Ecker yelled at him—"

At this point the two men, bearing the boy, Bolt, to the door of the house, were sharply halted. Ecker, a few paces behind them, commanded them. There was flash in his voice that matched the flash of his garment—Mombal's gift—a red robe.

"Silence! Your talk is out of order. *This boy was struck by lightning.*"

The two herders almost dropped the prone form they were bearing. They looked at Ecker with wide staring eyes. He was in earnest; in fact, he had the look of being desperately serious.

The shock of those words struck Hajjah with all their frightful impact.

Lightning! Lightning was the tool of King Witfessal!

Hajjah felt the trembling of Moo and the others who were pressing close against the screen. He heard Voileen catch her breath.

"He's lying!" Hajjah whispered. "He's lying, I tell you. There was a club—"

"Lightning!" Moo gasped. "He said *lightning!*"

"Hssssh!"

The herders were laying Bolt down on a bed of mats, and someone went for water. Ecker went on, speaking in the full, rich, confident tone that he had learned in his acting with traveling players.

"I saw everything, my good men. I was just coming down the road, returning from a conference with Mombal, the High Servant of the King—"

Ecker drew the words out. He paused for effect, and the simple herders were duly impressed.

"I saw this boy go to the shed and light the torches. And I saw the reason. Hajjah and his band of blasphemers at once ran out of hiding and entered this house. They're here—somewhere—perhaps already in the hidden tunnel we've heard so much about."

"It was a trick!" Grannz exclaimed, and a light of glory came into his face as he caught Ecker's meaning.

"A trick, indeed," said Ecker. "While Hajjah and his friends slipped through your fingers, this boy was lying to you, telling you his fires were an innocent prank. Could King Witfessal stand for such a falsehood? No. And so—*the lightning struck him down.*"

"The lightning struck him down," Grannz echoed in a bewitched voice.

Ecker turned to Jobwot. "You saw it strike him, didn't you?"

"Yes—yes. I saw it."

"So did I," Grannz said hastily. "I saw it strike. I didn't realize, at first—but I saw it."

ECKER turned to the third herder, the one who, not many moments earlier, had tried to persuade his two fellows that no violence would be needed, that Hajjah was the respectable son of a respectable father.

"And you, Zaywoodie—you saw?"

Zaywoodie didn't reply. He was bending over the boy, Bolt, washing the blood-stained face with water. The boy's eyes remained closed.

"Zaywoodie!" Ecker shouted it with rage. But he remembered to invest his fury with moral authority. "My friend Mombal will want to know."

The skeptical old herder rose slowly to face Ecker, and his eyes glinted anger and fear from his whitened face.

"To know what, Ecker?"

The young actor spread his arms dramatically. "To know whether you were privileged to see this deed done by the hand of King Witfessal."

"I—saw—the—deed." Zaywoodie's measured words were harder than stone. "This—boy—is—dead!"

XXVIII

MOOBURKLE smashed through the dravoth screen. He bounded into the outer room and fell down beside his brother, wailing and shouting.

Hajjah strode after him. If blasphemous thought could have brought down deadly lightning, Hajjah would have been struck down on the spot. No supreme master of lightning and thunder would have held off for more adequate proof. Hajjah was a storm. He was all of the storms. He was thunder and lightning and sudden death. All of these and more.

He rushed straight at Ecker. The pent-up hatreds of seasons past were fires in his blood, his muscles, his heart. He leaped from toe to fist, and the blow caught Ecker squarely.

Ecker staggered, and his handsome face bulged with shocked eyes and a gaping mouth. His hands flew up in futile gesture. Under the hailstorm of Hajjah's fists he shrank into a corner and slipped toward the floor.

Instantly, two of the herders leaped to Ecker's defense. They tried to grab Hajjah's arms. Twice Grannz was jerked off his feet before he and Jobwot were successful.

Hajjah, almost blind with rage, found himself powerless. A staff, thrust through the crook of his arms, pressed against the small of his back. Cords whipped around his wrists and ankles.

"You're mad, Hajjah. You're utterly mad. The Law will deal with you."

This came from Ecker. His damaged face lifted with a righteous smirk that was incongruous, considering his apparent helplessness.

ZAYWOODIE was the only one who offered a retort to Ecker.

"Lucky for you that you have friends."

"Lucky?" Ecker smoothed his hair. "Don't be absurd. I didn't try to fight this wild, crazy creature. I know too much of the law. I would have taken his blows—*and waited.*"

"For what?"

"For King Witfessal to act. Why should *I* fight? The Laws need no defense. As for this man of evil, there will be lightning enough to deal with him."

"Lightning!" Hajjah roared. "You can't hide behind that. You killed Bolt! You did it. You struck him—"

"Quiet! In the name of the King—"

Ecker's voice was a thing of power, not wild and full of hatred like Hajjah's. The herders obeyed Ecker as they would have obeyed an Agent. Hands slapped over Hajjah's mouth.

All he could do was to wait and watch what the heartbreaking moments would bring forth.

"If it *was* lightning—" Moo began. But he was cut short by Ecker.

"I warn you, Mooburkle. Don't try the patience of the King by doubting his acts. Don't fall victim to the follies of your friend."

Mooburkle was silent.

Hajjah looked to the rest of the party—the four young men who had come over the mountains to carry on for Teacher Crassie.

One of them said, "We'll go home now."

The four of them walked out.

Hajjah saw the horrified look in the eyes of Voileen. She knew what their departure meant. That was the end of friendship. Or else—

Or else this was the end of a cause.

As the herders bore Moo's brother away, Ecker turned for a final thrust. He shot the cold words at Voileen, who stood beside Hajjah.

"Now you can see," Ecker said, "why I've tried to keep you away from bad company. Your father will hear of this. When you decide to return to him, I'll see you. And if I can bring you back into the good graces of the King—"

"Goodbye," said Voileen through angry tears. "You've said enough."

They were gone. Only Voileen and Hajjah were left. She loosened the bonds to free him.

"Ecker lied." Hajjah said it over and over. "His whole life is a lie. But I'll show him."

"My grandfather Crassie told me," said the girl in a soothing voice, "that there would be times like these."

XXIX

HAJJAH was the guilty one.

That was what everyone said. Hajjah had schemed to get all of his friends in trouble, and poor Bolt was the victim of it all.

"But *I* didn't kill him," Hajjah would protest in vain.

A whirl of fever chased through his body whenever these rumors came to him. He had never killed anyone. He had never wanted to harm anyone—no one except the persons who harmed him first.

"It was Ecker who did it! I know it was!"

But no one would listen to this kind of talk. Ecker was the fine young actor that was rising in favor with the servants of King Witfessal. The day would come when Ecker himself

would be the High Servant of the King, people were saying.

"It was King Witfessal who sent the deadly lightning," people would say. "Bolt made a fatal mistake. But wait. This is not the end. The true leader of the evil is Hajjah. His time will come unless he mends his ways."

Torture grew within Hajjah's breast. He no longer went to the public gatherings at the roadcrossings. He sought the loneliness of herding fandruffs in the mountains.

And even when he was far away from the roads he could feel that people at distant schools or markets might be looking across the concave landscape at him, or gazing down on him from some unseen point many dunes overhead, pointing him out as Hajjah, the blasphemer.

Moo came to him and sat down to talk.

The old friendship was still there, under the surface, though both Hajjah and Moo found their conversation hard going at first. This was the first time since the burial of Moo's brother that they had met.

"I came," said Moo, "because Voileen wanted me to bring you a message."

"She's been forbidden to see me," said Hajjah. "Her father is caring for her."

"Yes—and trying to convert her to the friendship of Ecker. But this does not sway her feelings for you."

"Did she say that," Hajjah asked, "or is that your idea?"

"She wants to meet you," said Moo. "Against her father's orders she expects to return to Crassie's house."

"Is it guarded?"

"No. The Agents are sure it won't be necessary to guard it any more. In fact, the timid herders take a road far around it, they are so afraid the King might mistake them for blasphemers."

Hajjah laughed bitterly. How Crassie would have scorned such superstitious fears.

"The Agents have agreed with Ecker, too, that the tunnel should be filled up," said Moo.

"Why should he care?" Hajjah said with sharp disgust. "Isn't there any other way he can slap me?"

"Every slap he gives you is a step toward greater power," said Moo wisely. Moo recalled the early jealousies and hatreds that had taken root in Ecker's childhood. These had furnished the nourishment for Ecker's growth. And now, the arrogant actor's whole formula was to climb the ladder of fame by condemning others.

"THAT'S his secret," said Moo. "If he didn't have you to kick, he couldn't think of becoming the High Servant. But you've given him something sensational to rant about. And so he *cries*, 'Evil! Blasphemy!' That's all he needs. The more the people become alarmed, the more he basks in glory."

"How did you arrive at all of this?" Hajjah asked, studying his old friend curiously.

"I got it from Voileen," Moo admitted with a grin. "And I suspect her wits were sharpened to such things because she's a granddaughter of Teacher Crassie. Anyhow, it rings true."

Hajjah drew a deep breath. "Moo, I want to ask you something."

"I'll quote you an answer if I haven't forgotten my Law."

"Do you hold me responsible for your brother's death?"

"No."

"Thank you, Moo." Hajjah rose and paced around in a circle over the

stones of the mountain slope, as though he suddenly felt weightless and free. He returned with another question.

"Do you think the lightning struck Bolt? Or do you think Ecker or one of the others dashed him across the head with a staff?"

"I don't know, Haj . . . I've always known that the lightning could strike people dead. But lightning is fire. Bolt's head wasn't burned, Haj, it was crushed."

"Have you mentioned that fact to anyone, Moo?"

"I tried to talk with the three herders who had stood guard. There was one—Zaywoodie—"

"The one who took our side when they argued?"

"Yes," said Moo. "He admitted to me that Bolt's head had been bumped, not burned . . . Shall I tell Voileen that you'll meet her at Crassie's house soon?"

"As soon as the rains begin," said Hajjah.

As Moo shambled off, Hajjah watched him. What a change from the brisk little fat boy of a few seasons ago. Moo was thin, pallid, undernourished.

"Don't trip over yourself, friend," Hajjah called after him. "Stop at the High Servant's palace and ask for some fish. You're starving and don't know it."

XXX

HILL'S NOTEBOOK: I can't foresee what will become of these people if they use up all their fish. Apparently no other food supplies the necessary vitamins. I've made a few tests. If I could get away with it I'd try to set up a hatchery to replenish the lakes. But this would be blasphemy! (Such stupidity!)

XXXI

THE wide, low-roofed dravoth palace served as residence for the High Servant and headquarters for the Witfessal Agents.

Mombal, the highest dignitary, called Ecker in for a conference.

"A few questions, Ecker. You know the Laws. Do you think there is danger that the King's lightning will strike again, soon?"

Ecker stood straight and confident. Only the slightest flick of suspicion in his countenance hinted that he was on his guard.

"You are the High Servant," he replied. "You know the Laws better than I."

"Do you believe that the lightning struck Bolt?" Mombal asked sharply.

"Of course."

"For his lying?"

"Yes . . . Lying *where* a crime against the Law was involved."

"Now, consider this carefully," said Mombal, slipping around the room wisely and mysteriously. He stopped to catch Ecker's face full in the light. "Do you think you could ask this young Hajjah questions which would bring out the lies in him?"

"Certainly," came the arrogant reply.

"If he gives you lies, the lightning will surely strike him, too."

Ecker frowned. Mombal pressed the point farther. Surely if the offender, Hajjah, were to lie as much as Bolt, the King would answer with sudden death. A public question would demonstrate the King's power to all.

"You're trying to put me in an embarrassing position," *said* Ecker shrewdly. "If the lightning shouldn't strike—"

"Do you doubt that it would? You know Hajjah to be the arch offender."

The worried look on Ecker's face

suddenly vanished, and a keen observer might have noted a flash of cunning and cruelty in his eyes.

"I have a simpler plan," said Ecker. "One that will not put the will of the King to a test. The King may be busy making his light shine brighter on the dravoth fields or guiding the way for some fisherman."

"You are poetic in your subterfuges," thought Mombal.

"My plan," said Ecker, "would be to wrench from Hajjah the partner who urges him to go on with his folly."

"Mooburkle?"

"No, Voileen. She is the spirit behind his plan. Without her to fire his enthusiasm he would never go on."

"And your plan—"

"In complete accord with the wishes of her father, I shall marry her. It will be an honor to confer upon her. Nome will be pleased. She will be made happy. And she will forget about Hajjah. Then he will go back to herding and forget his blasphemous plan."

THERE was an uneasiness in Mombal's mystic eyes. He considered the problem in silence, passing his small white fingers over his brow.

"Very well, Ecker," he said smoothly. "We shall use both plans. And a third, as well. Among them we shall put an end to these matters that trouble our people."

"I shall marry Voileen?"

"At once. We shall also set a time for a public hearing for Hajjah. You shall question him. King Witfessal may strike him dead. And for our third action, we shall close the tunnel that Crassie once began."

Mombal folded his red and blue cape around him and walked into the Witfessal palace.

Later, he returned to the porch to discover that Ecker was still there.

"Well?"

"High Servant of the King," Ecker bowed graciously, "I ask you to reconsider."

"Is something wrong with our three plans?"

Ecker drew himself up as he might if about to recite the hardest lines of a play. But his words came forth bluntly, edged with anger.

"Your plan bears the marks of a trick."

"How so?"

"Because the people will come to the hearings in high excitement," said Ecker. "They will expect to see Hajjah killed by a stroke of lightning."

"Certainly."

"If the lightning shouldn't come—where would I be? I would have earned laughter and scorn. All of my fine service to the King will be undone."

Mombal laughed cynically. "You forget, Ecker, you're not the one on trial. It's Hajjah. Or is all this activity of yours something less noble than it seems?"

"I don't understand you."

"Yes you do," Mombal's eyes blazed fire. "Take heed, Ecker. Your hunger for glory can be seen, as plain as the King's Cloud. But don't be too eager to take my place. I have a few seasons yet to live."

XXXII

MOMBAL made preparations without delay. He would carry out all three plans. Then neither he nor Nome should have any further worries about their former connections with the late Teacher Crassie. The people would know that they were in the clear. Their hands would be clean.

Mombal called for Nome.

"Cease your worries over being the

son of Crassie," the High Servant said. "You shall help me execute a three-way plan. Are you willing to marry your daughter to Ecker?"

"Indeed," said Nome, bowing gratefully. "That would put an end to her foolishness. It would bring her back to respect."

"That is the first plan. The second concerns the tunnel which Crassie dug. It must be clogged with stones."

"I shall place men to work on it," said Nome. "I will assign the task to these innumerable beggars who drift past the palace asking for food."

A frown passed over the countenance of Mombal. He had tried to ignore the fact that these hungry ones were growing in number. They were coming from the farther roadcrossings where the lakes were said to be without fish.

"And the third plan," said Mombal, "is to hold a public hearing for Hajjah. We shall give our young friend Ecker the privilege of questioning him."

Nome bowed. "An honor indeed for my future son-in-law. Ecker will have no trouble defeating the herdsmen's son in a match of wits."

"Is Hajjah low on wits?"

"I am told he always resorts to fists," said Nome. "At any rate, we shall see his complete defeat."

"After what happened to Bolt, the public will expect nothing less than a lightning death—if this Hajjah is as glib with his blasphemy as we think he is."

"True . . . true." Nome frowned, but said no more. It was plain that Nome was not entirely satisfied with the third of these plans, and yet could not quite define his dissatisfaction.

"I'll send word to my daughter at once," said Nome, "that she must submit to this marriage."

XXXIII

AMONG the hungry idlers that loitered by the palace grounds Nome came upon young Mooburkle. He was no longer the chubby, funny, little fat boy of a few seasons ago. He was thin and white, and his old habitual grin showed a mouthful of hungry teeth.

"*You* here?" Nome uttered in surprise.

"Our last three fandruffs died. They all seem to be dying in our part of the mountains. I'm hungry," Mooburkle said.

"You should feast each time one dies."

"We do. Nothing's gone to waste. But I'm still hungry. Will there be any fish left on your plates?"

"I'll let you *earn* a fish for yourself," said Nome. "Do an errand for me. Go to Voileen. Tell her to come here. She is to be married at once—to Ecker."

"Ecker?" Moo shook his head. "I can't tell her that. Have someone else—"

"For two fish?"

"Two? Um." Moo glanced at the darkening sky. The rains were coming. "All right, I'll go tell her."

It was the strange look that Mooburkle gave Nome on departing that caused the latter to shudder.

XXXIV

THERE was something wrong. Nome felt it in his bones. He stood on the palace porch and watched the rains drench the lands. He could see the road. Its gentle concave course was mostly visible between the palace and his own dravoth house.

But he couldn't see any sign of Mooburkle.

"I'm going home," he told Mombal

abruptly. "I must be sure Voileen understands what is expected of her."

"You aren't dressed for the rain," said Mombal. "Take one of my robes."

Nome donned one of the splendid red and blue robes and pulled the hood close around his face. The garment fitted him well, for he and Mombal were similar in size and build.

"In such splendor," he thought, "I will have more prestige in commanding Voileen."

He crossed the palace grounds. The torrent clattered down on his waterproof hood and robe.

He left the line of muddy tracks made by beggars scurrying to shelter. He slogged down the road past the dravoth marshes, across the footbridge under which the waters were racing and roaring.

He glanced back at his rain-filled tracks. Amid all the sloshing of the downpour he had the strange feeling that he was being watched. But there was no one to be seen on the road. His path lay around the ledge of the hill. Most travelers of this road followed the bottom land along the lake.

As he began the short hill-climb, momentarily out of sight of roadcrossings and palace, *he was struck down.*

Not by lightning. But by something just as deadly: a stone as heavy as his body.

The flying weight caught him at the hips. He fell to the mud, crying out. His hooded eyes turned upward. He saw the second stone being hurled at him. It crashed against his head. Blackness engulfed him—a crushing, painful, murderous blackness.

His last sensations were the frightful, sickening sensations of being clubbed to death with stones.

Then Nome, the father of Voileen, the grandson of Madman Hill, was no more.

XXXV

HILL'S NOTEBOOK: Crassie is amazed at my skill with metals. Every son likes to think his dad is the greatest man who ever lived. Crassie is sure I am. Nothing like this metal job has ever been seen in this world.

The principle of disintegration came back to me readily. My seasons of shopwork in Uranus are proving their worth.

The fuel problem is a stunner, but at last I'm on the right track.

XXXVI

THROUGH the rain, Hajjah hiked along hurriedly, leaping over puddles and streams. Now and then he caught his reflection spinning across the muddy waters. He was wearing his best dark-season suit, and its rows of bright ornamental stones sparkled like points of fire in the semidarkness.

Presently Moo caught up with him.

"I came to warn you," Moo said breathlessly. "The palace is after you at last."

Hajjah was instantly belligerent.

"How do you know?"

"Because I have just earned two fish;" said Moo. "By taking a message from Nome to Voileen. She is to be married to Ecker."

"When did she say that?"

"*She* didn't say it," Moo corrected. "It was Nome's order. What are you going to do about it?"

Hajjah stopped in his muddy tracks. He gazed through the rain toward Crassie's house a short distance ahead.

"The question is, what will she do?" said Hajjah. "All I can do is to keep my promise. I said I would meet her in Crassie's tunnel when the rains began. I'm going on."

Moo followed after him. "Let me

talk with you, Haj. It isn't too late to turn back."

"She and I made a bargain," Hajjah muttered. "I'll keep my half of it."

"There's more trouble I haven't told you about."

The fearful look in Moo's white face caused Hajjah to stop and listen. A few paces short of Crassie's house the two of them slipped into a fandruff shed under a leaky roof—a shed that Hajjah associated with the tragedy of Moo's brother.

In swift nervous statements Moo now sketched the rumors he had heard of ominous plans from the palace.

"They're going to give you a public questioning, Haj. Do you know what that means?"

"Ecker, again!"

"Of course. What will you have to live for when he gets through?"

"Or will I live through?" Hajjah said numbly. Shadowy arms of coming troubles seemed already to be pounding him.

"As if that isn't enough," Moo continued, "they're going to fill up the mouth of this tunnel to make sure no one else goes on with these blasphemies."

"I'm going ahead," said Hajjah stubbornly.

"Think it over, Haj. There's still time to turn back. You might still have a chance with Voileen."

"How?"

"If you'd forget your promise to Crassie—"

"Moo!"

"Then Ecker couldn't hurt you at the public hearings. He'd ask you if you believed there were other Kings beside Witfessal and you'd say, 'No . . . Other providers of fish and food? . . . No. Other worlds . . . No!'"

"Other worlds—*yes!*"

Hajjah could feel the blaze of his eyes almost as if Crassie were again whispering to him from the deathbed. And yet, deep in the pit of his stomach there was a sinking feeling. Possibly, Moo was right. All he would have to do to clear himself of his crimes would be to make a staunch declaration. Hajjah was momentarily shaken. How simple it would be—merely to state that he knew Crassie was a mistaken fool. That he knew the Laws of King Witfessal were infallible.

Such a turnabout would dissolve his troubles. Then Voileen's father could no longer object to him.

Hajjah stopped in the midst of this whirl of thoughts to gaze at the white, undernourished figure of Mooburkle.

Crassie's predictions were swiftly coming true. Thousands of persons, like Moo, were already suffering for lack of good food.

XXXVII

HAJJAH skipped over the last steps of the muddy trail through the spattering rain.

There were Voileen's tracks!

Hajjah's nerves tingled with joyful relief. She had entered the house ahead of him. Whatever troubles might come, she was with him. He hurried in.

The dravoth mat that screened the tunnel entrance had been left leaning against the wall of the inner room. Hajjah rehung it and bounded on down.

"Voileen!" he called. The round echoes melted away in the blackness. "Voileeeeen!"

Soon he heard faint musical echoes—Voileen was calling an answer from what seemed many dunes away. Good. He would soon overtake her.

He struck dry chunks of dravoth together until he succeeded in lighting a torch. Then he proceeded down the long black tunnel.

Here were tools that had been left along the low walls by the ill-fated party of helpers from over the mountain range. Bitterly, Hajjah recollected their retreat from this cause.

The thought of Bolt's fate shot pangs of hurt through him. His fists tightened. Ecker would slide out of his evil doings. He would cleverly play on the emotions of the people to keep himself in their good graces. And meanwhile they would delight in turning their backs on anyone who was friendly with Hajjah.

Even Moo had been shaken.

Down, down — through the curving lane of blackness Hajjah descended. Still he failed to overtake Voileen. Her tracks were ahead of him. Why had she not waited?

Had Hajjah been through this part of the tunnel before?

Suddenly he came upon a chamber where the tunnel widened out into a *natural* cavern. Its ceilings and floors were spiked with iridescent stalactites and stalagmites.

He had never seen this before!

Why hadn't he remembered it? Didn't Crassie once take him to the end of the excavation? Yes — but it had entered no natural cave.

Someone had done more digging since that time Crassie had led him down this way.

"Voileeen!"

In a few moments the faint answer came, like the sigh of a wind through barren dravoth stalks. And yet it was surely Voileen's voice calling his name.

"Ha—a-a-j-a-h-h-h!"

Which way did it come from? Or was he only imagining it? He couldn't be sure.

He knew, of course, that the whole direction of the excavated tunnel had been downward. Not straight down, but slanting. The calves of his legs were tight from holding back his descent.

Here the stalactites and stalagmites helped to restore his sense of up and down.

But as he went on a little farther the whole system of up-and-down seemed to go into reverse.

He was still within the natural cave. And still on the trail — for here again were the tracks of Voileen's boots. But the direction of the stalactites and stalagmites had apparently turned about.

Or had *he* turned about?

No, the torchlight looked back *down* upon the part of the cave he had just descended through. And yet he was now *climbing upward instead of descending.*

XXXVIII

LOW rumblings of sound seeped through from what now seemed far below him. Voileen might be back that way.

He retraced his steps for a short distance *downward.* Where was she? It was not like her to strike on ahead. Had he really heard her calling, or were those far-away notes only echoes of his own voice?

He paused, shocked to discover that at this particular point he was apparently *weightless.*

This curious sensation had passed over him before at this same point. He remembered it with a definite association. Something a few paces to his left had appeared to be hanging in midair, and he remembered feeling as if he, too, were floating without support.

Now he observed this phenomenon more carefully. Against the black background he could not see what, if anything, supported a cluster of stones. They were bunched much like the petals of a huge blossom.

Farther on, he remembered, there was a white rock that resembled a human skull and backbone with white ribs. Yes — there it was again.

He made his way across to the shelf of rock where this white landmark hung.

It was a human skeleton.

Weightlessly it rolled at his touch.

Its dry, decayed bones tended to shake apart. But not to fall, for at this level of the cave everything seemed strangely balanced. There was no tendency to fall in any direction.

For Hajjah, however, there was a pronounced tendency to climb — *in any direction.* He groped nervously. The torch dropped out of his hand and floated leisurely through the mysterious space.

He scrambled along the ragged surfaces to recover it, and hugged it as if it were a precious jewel.

Hajjah knew, as he retraced his steps, that the skeleton he had seen was someone who had lived long ago. Half-forgotten legends of a crazy man's mysterious life and death came back to him.

So here was the famous Madman Hill!

XXXIX

HAJJAH hurried back over the path by which he had come. The rumbling noises led him back toward the mouth of the cave. He kept wondering if he had somehow passed Voileen — but that was impossible in this narrow tunnel.

The return climb seemed to take seasons of climbing. But here at last was the wall with the tools leaning against it. The entrance was only a little farther up the grade.

Brrrrmmm! The rumbling noises suddenly took on meaning. The mouth of the tunnel was being filled.

Already the light of the entrance was blacked out.

"Voileeeen!" He called. "Lee-eenie!"

She was not back here.

Hajjah paused for only a moment. Had he any proof that she had returned to this entrance? No.

But had he any proof that she was still in the cave?

She had *been* here. Her boot-tracks had penetrated the cavern of stalactites at some recent time. But whether she was still on *this* side of the stone barrier that Ecker's men were building, Hajjah couldn't be sure.

If she weren't already in the tunnel, then it was certain Ecker and her father would never let her come in.

And when they learned that Hajjah was *in,* they would certainly never trouble themselves to dig him out. Not even for a public hearing.

Hajjah hurried down the steep way for a second time. The long climb had sapped his energies. He should have stopped for a bite from the package of dried meats he had brought. But now he was frantic to know about Voileen.

Again he was in the natural cavern, where the up and downs of his feelings changed sides. He hesitated, uncertain which of several conflicting impulses to obey. The natural tunnel had numerous branches, all of them inviting him to explore — at his own peril.

And again there was that white skeleton, fascinating him with its mystery. Here was the last of the sensational legend.

He crept over to the white heap of bones. He touched the dome of the skull. It floated leisurely away from his hand and back again, like a bubble in a faint breeze.

Near the floating skeleton were several miscellaneous objects — likewise hanging close to the wall, though with no particular means of support. Little

discs of metal — scraps of wearing apparel — a small knife — and a finely-woven little book with writing in it.

Hajjah took the book in his quivering fingers, opened it.

What mysterious characters. Did they hold secrets — or were they only crazy, little pictures with no meanings?

Through the first part Hajjah could recognize nothing. But here and there were sprinklings of familiar symbols. Toward the latter part of the book the passages were almost entirely legible.

At once Hajjah was engrossed.

XL

HILL'S NOTEBOOK: The gravitational system of this hollow planet is a headache. It cannot be, and yet it is. Maybe King Witfessal could have explained it.

As I discovered during my earthquake fall, there is a level within this planetary shell toward which all things fall. From the outside they tend to fall "down"—that is—*inward*—toward this level. From the inside, the tendency is to fall "down"—that is—*outward*—toward said level.

Naturally, all things would fall *toward* the center of the planet, if it were solid. But it is a well-known fact of gravitational action that a mountain will pull a plumb line out of its vertical direction. The mass of the mountain offers an attraction competing with that of the center of the planet.

In this planet the proximity of the mass directly under one's feet — whether he stands on the outside of the planet or on the inside — evidently causes it to act with greater force than that of the center of the planet—which, in this case, is empty.

This phenomenon interests me so much that I have secured a pledge from Crassie. More of this later.

XLI

HILL'S NOTEBOOK: We have excavated through this central layer of gravity.

I have now given up the hope, however, of returning to the outside. I am in my last days, and I wish to remain with Crassie. I am convinced that his restraint in forcing these foreign facts upon the people is a wise policy. At present a break to the outside would shock them terribly. I'm sure they would be insulted and enraged to rash action.

But Crassie will devote himself to the job of paving the way. For the time will come when these people must make contact with the outside world or perish.

If the famines which I have predicted should come soon, Crassie will have less trouble persuading his pupils that this outward exploration is desirable.

And now — Crassie's pledge to me. When I die he will place me in this tunnel.

I'm yielding to the inevitable. My feebleness is increasing. But I still relish my old spirit of exploration. Perhaps I'm a trifle eccentric — the people here think I'm mad. But for my final resting place I've decided upon that cavern from which there is no falling. Crassie has agreed simply to let me return to the elements. In the cavern of "gravitational equilibrium" I'll come to rest.

XLII

HAJJAH'S torch flickered out.

Tenderly, almost reverently, he pressed the finely-woven book back against the wall.

His trembling fingertips accidentally passed over the surface of the skeleton. The dry bones floated away at his touch, then came together again with a

quiet tapping. All was silent.

Hajjah took a deep breath. He was scarcely aware of the pitch blackness, which might have been terrifying to some of his friends under these circumstances. The deep impression held sway over him. Through this little book he had talked with a truly great man.

He groped through the blackness, scraping past the rough rocky walls. Everywhere he seemed to see a blob of white that his eyes tried to make into the clean well-shaped skull he had just looked upon.

But the blackness was absolute, and all his sense of direction was gone. Though he was now determined to go on, he couldn't be sure he was making any progress whatever —

Until he heard the low vibrating noise that came humming down from one of the invisible passages above him.

The sound was utterly unlike anything Hajjah had ever heard before. It was like the shrill song of a wind through a thousand dead plant stalks. But it was also like the mad rush of water under a footbridge. Hajjah plodded toward it, slowly at first, then more swiftly as his tunnel path became smooth and straight.

The sound grew clearer. The musical buzzing was punctuated loudly with the staccato clatter of rocks.

Hajjah was advancing rapidly now. The path was a steep upward climb, but there were no sidetracks. Only a narrow tunnel with barely room enough to crawl along on hands and knees.

Louder — louder — a continuous zzzooommmm! On and on like an unending roar of thunder.

So loud it came that Hajjah slacked his speed. The sound seemed to be right before him, and yet there was nothing ahead for his hand to touch. All was blackness and mystery and everlasting climbing.

Occasionally the tunnel would bend, and sometimes it was so steep that Hajjah would spread his elbows to keep from sliding back. He would dig his toes into the round walls and hurry on. By now he was sure this terrible noise must be the roar of another world.

XLIII

IT WOULD have been highly entertaining to a certain man-about-planets named Randolph Hill if his spirit could have peered into the mind of Hajjah. Grotesque pictures were being conjured by the excited young Wanzuuran. But Hajjah couldn't make his mental pictures fit those awful sounds.

Such a strange clattering, humming sound, to one who has never seen or heard of power machinery of any kind, could not help being an ominous experience. But Randolph Hill would have credited Hajjah with great courage, no doubt, for moving ahead.

Hajjah's brain and heart were fired with a blast of emotion that was far more than sheer courage. If this were the roar of a new world, it would be a double victory. Hajjah's old world, his own Wanzuura, would suddenly discover him. The Agents would bow to him and brush the dust from his boots—

Or would they? Or would that sly, jealous Ecker contrive to take the credit away from him?

But what would this new world be? Another Wanzuura? With hungry people? Hajjah tried to picture it. He visualized the inside of a vast sphere, with rock walls. Perhaps there would be little patches of blue lakes high overhead.

ZZZZOOOOMMMMMM!

Now there were sparks of light ahead. Nervous, jumping light. Light that splashed like rain dashing down on stones. Flying fire!

A moving shadow blocked out that spray of light, now, and again, seeming to move from side to side. The silhouette of that moving shadow gradually took form.

The form was crawling along on hands and knees, following in the path of that zooming, clattering *something*.

"Voileen! *Voileen!*"

Not until Hajjah caught up with her and tapped the sole of her boot did she turn. She was startled. Her eyes danced with excess excitement.

"Hajjah!"

Against the roar he couldn't hear her words, but the light of the sparks showed her saying them, her frightened expression changing to an eager smile.

She struck a projecting arm of metal that hung to the rear of the noisy instrument. The roar died away. The tunnel echoes faded to silence. The sparks ceased to fly.

At the touch of another finger of metal a soft white light appeared in a little semicircle on the upper edge of the machine.

By this glow Hajjah could see the speechless happiness in Voileen's face. And when she reached her hand out to him and said, "Haj — you *did* come," Hajjah felt his eyes go watery.

"Of course I came. I've been trying to find you all this time. But how did you ever find your way here? What is that thing? Where are we? Why didn't you wait for me?" Hajjah couldn't ask the questions fast enough.

"Wait — one at a time, Haj," Voileen protested. And before she could answer anything she fainted away in his arms.

For a few moments he was deathly scared. For all he knew, that instrument could bring on sudden death. Was it not lightning he had seen?

BUT soon after he had applied his flask of water to her face and lips she returned to consciousness, smiling weakly.

"I didn't know I was so tired," she gasped. "So much of this roar has made me dizzy. But you've come — "

"I didn't have any other intentions, Leenie."

"Didn't you?" Her eyes were wide. "Didn't Moo persuade you to stay — and save yourself? He told me you were already on the verge of changing your mind, and that a word from him would wipe out the whole silly scheme."

"I'll choke him, with pleasure. He dreamed all that. I had no intentions—"

"I should have known," Voileen sighed. "I tried to make myself believe you were calling — "

"I did call."

"But I waited — and you didn't come. What happened?"

"That cavern — I stopped to see — " and Hajjah related his strange discoveries. To his amazement, he learned that Voileen had already known of these things through Crassie, but had faithfully kept them secret. As to the extended tunnel, that, too, had been one of Crassie's secrets. Fearing that the people might disturb his father's final resting place if they ever chanced to explore these depths, Crassie had devised a door to block off the larger part of the excavation.

"So you were going off to the other world all by yourself, Leenie."

"I was desperate. I was afraid Ecker would come down and get me. I had to take a chance."

"Where did you get this odd contraption that pulls you along?"

"It doesn't pull me," Voileen laughed. "It's a digging instrument. It goes where you guide it, and it breathes the dirt and stones that it cuts through."

"It *breathes?* It's alive, then?"

"It acts alive, but Grandfather Crassie never could make me understand.

He only showed me how to use it, and how to feed it. He watched his father build it, and together they fixed lots of food for it so that we could make it go on and on."

"It must be alive. How can I see the rest of it?"

"There's no way to see it until we find our way through to some space. But I'll show you how to make it dig and turn stones into breath. First you press this arm. Grandfather called it the *disintegrator*. Then you press this one, which starts the teeth that bite through the stone — "

"Teeth that bite? It is alive, Leenie. Did it ever bite you?"

"No, I keep away from its nose when it's biting."

"You mean its mouth?"

"Nose," said Voileen. "It bites with its nose."

Hajjah muttered with amazement. The Laws of King Witfessal had never told of anything like this.

XLIV

GLOOMY consternation fell upon those persons who discovered that Voileen and Hajjah were missing.

But this tragic rumor had not reached the palace. Likewise, it had yet to travel to the roadcrossings far and wide.

Meanwhile Wanzuura, by and large, was in a flurry of excitements over the events which were thought to be in store.

As soon as the bright season came around there would be a wedding.

Soon, also, would be a public hearing on the grounds of the palace.

These two events could not help but enhance the popularity of the brilliant Ecker, for he was to be the hero of both occasions.

Ecker would marry the daughter of Nome, and, according to rumor, that magnanimous act on his part would completely restore her to the realm of respectability. After all, the people said, Voileen was really a very sweet girl. It was simply bad company — her grandfather and that young rebel Hajjah — that had hurt her reputation.

As for the public hearing, that should make an end of all blasphemies. That, together with the filling of the tunnel, not to mention the much talked-of sudden death of Bolt, would cow all radical young upstarts for many generations to come.

Some rumors anticipated even more startling results. The public hearing itself might bring about another violent death. Could King Witfessal withhold his wrathful lightning, once the blasphemies of Hajjah were exposed?

At any rate, there would be a feast and a celebration in honor of the King as soon as these ceremonies were over. Already, the Agents were storing up a supply of fish for the feast.

But all at once, like a flood chasing down the mountains after a cloudburst, came the upsetting news: Three persons were missing.

Where were Voileen and her father? And where was Hajjah?

Not one of the three had been seen since the rains began.

The Witfessal Agents, always alert to extraordinary happenings, plowed through the mud toward the palace to compare stories. Some of them stopped to exchange news with beggars huddled in fandruff sheds or deserted fishermen's huts.

No one showed any greater surprise than Ecker over the reported disappearance of Nome. Ecker had just returned from a roundabout journey to visit some of the herders in the hinterlands, and as he was striding up toward the palace, an Agent turned to him.

"You've heard who has been lost?"

"Not Mombal," Ecker said cautiously.

"Not Mombal, indeed, but his assistant, Nome," said the Agent.

Ecker was caught by a momentary paralysis. His best acting abilities were required to break out of it. "How—how did that happen?"

"No one knows," said the Agent. "When last seen he was on his way to tell his daughter of his plans for her marriage. You know all about that, I presume."

"Well—did he talk with her? Does she know what happened—"

"She—haven't you heard?" said the Agent. "She's missing, too. And her friend, Hajjah, as well. Yes, all three of them. Or course they may all have been trapped down in Crassie's tunnel. People are saying that Moo, Hajjah's friend, declares that's where they are."

ECKER went into the palace, his face red with confusion. There was Mombal waiting to greet him.

"It was very baffling, this disappearance of Nome and his daughter," said Mombal, his eyes darting back and forth. "I lent Nome my robe just before he left to walk home in the rain."

"You're worried about the robe, I suppose," said Ecker in a manner excessively harsh and defensive.

"I'm worried that something may have happened to him that might have been meant for me," said Mombal.

"Pray don't let us jump at conclusions." Ecker drew himself up with an effort to regain his lost poise. "Since he and Voileen and Hajjah are all gone, I feel sure they must have been trapped in the tunnel—which, I understand, had been closed."

Mombal raised a skeptical eyebrow. "Are you, as the intended husband of Voileen, willing to let the matter rest there? . . . Or would you advise that we reopen the tunnel to search for the three dead bodies?"

"Now you're trying to put my love to a test, Mombal," said Ecker sarcastically.

"What do you intend to do?" Mombal put the question squarely. "With these three gone, your show will suffer, my friend. You don't have Hajjah to strike with lightning. You don't have Voileen to marry, to save her from Hajjah. What can the people praise you for now?"

Cold hatred passed through the glares between Mombal and Ecker. But the young actor repressed the bitter sneer that tried to form on his lips. He walked slowly to the palace window and gazed up toward the clouds.

"King Witfessal," he recited in reverent tones, "will praise me for the sacrifice I am about to make."

"And what would that be?"

"I shall refrain from searching the tunnel for the one I love. I shall ask no one to dig for her. Much as I love her, I am willing for her to take her punishment. That tunnel was a crime against the Law. If she has gone into it—she and her father and Hajjah—let them suffer death. For the good of the Law I sacrifice her."

"For the good of the Law," Mombal repeated with a bitterly cynical smile on his lips, "you sacrifice her! . . . Very well, the tunnel will remain closed. I shall cancel the orders for a wedding and for a public hearing. But the feast we shall have."

"And what," Ecker asked, "do we have left to feast about?"

"The noble sacrifice of a devout lover," said the High Servant of the King.

XLV

HAJJAH heard Voileen gasp. The tunnel digger suddenly hummed

at high speed. Rocks jumped out of its path. Streaks of light blazed in and struck away the world of blackness.

Hajjah struck a lever. The machine stopped and fell silent.

Light! Light! Terrible, frightening, impossibly bright light. Such intense light as the world had never known.

Hajjah and Voileen were suddenly *out*. The tunnel was all back of them. *Before them was a new world!*

Voileen clasped her hands over her eyes. She was afraid to look. And yet she was so excited that she was afraid not to make the most of this rare sight. Perhaps it would stay for only a moment. Surely such dazzling, painful brightness as this couldn't last.

Hajjah tried to tell her it was all coming from one little ball of fire high up in that awful, vast nothingness.

For both of them it was a shock beyond anything their hollow-planet minds had ever conceived.

For many minutes they simply gazed. Then they would turn to each other, gasping, laughing, crying by turns.

They nestled in the pocket of rocks through which they had so suddenly emerged. At first, all they wanted to do was stay right in their tracks and gaze.

Then Hajjah laughed to discover that both of them were holding onto the handles of the electric tunnel digger. In all the immense panorama before them, it was the only familiar thing.

And what a friend to hold onto. It had brought them here. Hajjah declared it would take them back.

Voileen made no comment on the matter of going back.

However, only a few moments before this sudden burst, Voileen had declared herself staunchly.

"If we should reach a new land—a land where people can live," she had said dreamily, while they had rested, "we'll never return home."

"You're very sure you'd never want to return?" Hajjah had asked.

"Never. Not with Ecker waiting to destroy you, and to marry me. Not when I have a father who hates me and is willing to sell me to a man I hate—all for the glory of King Witfessal. No, Hajjah, I won't return. I'll marry you and we'll live in whatever new land we find."

Then Hajjah had pressed his face against hers in a passionate token of love, and their lips had blended.

Their talk, during that hour of idleness, had been about an imaginary world that neither had been able to visualize. And all the while, this bright, dazzling, limitless realm of openness had been only a few minutes' digging ahead of them.

Now Hajjah sprang up. He wanted to walk along the rocks.

"But you'll fall off," Voileen protested.

"Where will I fall?"

"I—I don't know—but can't you see —*there are no sides to this world!* It isn't walled in."

"There's plenty of rock under us," Hajjah declared. "All that we dug through is under us now."

"But it all curves away from us—like an upside down bowl. Suppose we should start to slide, with no ground to catch us?"

"There's plenty of ground here. It's too rough to let us slip."

THEY plodded along together over the mountainous terrain. The enormous sky was terrifying, and neither of them could feel comfortable at first, with such a vast emptiness threatening them from above.

Every few minutes there were new discoveries that made the world seem

an impossible dream.

"That ball of light—look, Haj, it's moving."

Haj looked up at the dazzling star which seemed to serve as the "King's Cloud" of this realm. Undoubtedly it had moved. But it moved too slowly for its action to be detected. As time went on, this sun floated on down to the edge of the mountains and finally slipped out of sight.

"We'd better get back," Haj said, trying to suppress the note of alarm in his voice.

"What do you think's going to happen?" Voileen asked. Her body trembled against his shoulder.

"I don't know," Haj admitted. "But it's getting dark. There might be something wrong."

"It's already darker than it ever gets in Wanzuura," Voileen gasped. "Put your arm around me, Hajjah. Do you think we're safe?"

"We're not going to be afraid of darkness," Hajjah said, "after all we've come through. But we'll stay by our camp until we learn what to expect."

They found a spring close by, and it was more as if they had a share in this new world after they had drunk the sweet water. They bathed their aching arms and made themselves comfortable. A stellar show was spread before them in the deep blue sky.

They watched the magic of the stars and wondered how such things could be.

They wondered, too, if all such mysteries were completely understood by the people who dwelt in this land.

But the mysteries of the skies were no more wonderful than those of the darkened land.

On the gently curved horizon only a few dunes away—for one could see only a few dunes' distance on this outside world—jewels of lights were twinkling through the soft hazy night air. Lights were moving through definite paths. Star-like lights were heaped up in tall, graceful towers.

"It's magic," Hajjah said. "Those moving lines of light must be people with some sort of torchlights. That's the world we've come to explore."

"Not yet, Haj."

"Afraid?"

"A little."

"Want to go back to home?"

"N-no. I just want to stay here—resting against your arm, so I'll know I'm safe—and listen to you talk, Haj. Tell me it's real."

Hajjah laughed quietly. "I suppose if I weren't with you, Leenie, you'd say it was only a beautiful, terrible dream."

"If you weren't here with me," Voileen mused, "I wouldn't be here."

XLVI

THE fence was not made of dravoth. Hajjah examined the posts carefully and saw that they were the product of some plant life—apparently the same sort that grew over all these mountainsides—big bunchy cones full of green needles that stemmed from a tough stalk.

But it was a fence, even though the posts were widely spaced and linked together with strings of hard round metal.

Hajjah and Voileen followed that fence for several dunes. They learned from it. It told them plainly many things.

Since the fence led all the way down to the blue foliage-filled valley, and since it curved along a roadway and took in a beautiful white mansion, obviously this land belonged to the people who lived in that mansion.

And obviously those people owned fandruffs (though the animals which

were contentedly grazing among the soft green brush that filled the valley were very odd-looking fandruffs).

"We are camping in their land," said Hajjah. "Maybe they will like it. Maybe not."

"We left the tunnel digger well hidden," Voileen commented. "They won't find it unless we show them the way."

"We won't say anything about it," said Hajjah, "until we see how friendly they are. They might want to take it for theirs because it is on their land."

Voileen frowned. The suggestion was a jarring one. This world was too beautiful. The people who lived in it must be beautiful too, not mean and hurtful.

"Soon we'll know," said Hajjah, and he led the way down the slope. To Voileen it was a perilous hike, for the new day had not lessened her apprehension about the unnatural curve of this new world. She seemed forever to be in danger of falling off.

Now, they stopped. Voileen cupped her hand to her ear.

"It the wind singing through a dravoth stalk," Hajjah said.

"No—it's coming from that big white mansion. Listen!"

"It's a song! But how can anyone sing so loud?"

"It's more like the high song the digging machine made when it tore up out of the earth," said Voileen.

"No, it's more like the cry of a homesick fandruff calf."

"I like it!" Voileen exclaimed. "It's a new kind of music. Let's go see what causes it."

She led the way on the run.

She stopped at the edge of the green yard that spread around the mansion. What she saw was so fascinating that she couldn't even speak to Hajjah when he caught up with her.

There was the source of the entrancing music.

It was coming from a glistening horn which a small boy was holding to his lips.

The little fellow was swinging idly in a shallow net that hung low between two trees—or rather, to Hajjah's eye, two tall dravoth-like stalks.

"A music boy," Voileen whispered. "He's singing music through those shiny metal tubes."

They watched in silence for a long time.

"Why does he have to do that?" Hajlah finally asked.

"He's doing it because he wants to—the same as we sing," Voileen said. "Can't you see he's happy?"

"Do you like it, Leenie?"

"Of course. It's wonderful."

"Would you like to make music like that yourself?"

"Oh, Haj! Could I?"

"I'm going to get one of those shiny things for you. I don't know where or how, but I'm going to get one!"

XLVII

WHEN the boy finally stopped his playing and started into the house Haj called to him from the edge of the yard.

The little fellow turned in surprise. He rubbed his eyes. But Voileen was smiling at him, and he smiled back.

"The song was good," Voileen called. "Do you like to do it?"

The boy's face was a study in consternation.

"The song was good," Voileen repeated.

The boy burst out laughing. He walked out toward them; he was not the least bit timid. He was obviously fascinated by the strangeness of their faces, and no less by the glittering jewels that adorned their clothing.

He swung about briskly and shouted something that neither Hajjah nor Voileen understood.

A large, quiet man then emerged from the doorway and came down to him. The man, clothed in a white uniform with ornamental gold braid, was strangely obedient to the little fellow, who seemed to be giving orders and making explanations.

"They don't talk so you can understand them," Voileen whispered.

"I don't understand it," Hajjah mumbled. "Their words sound big and jumbled, like some of the words Teacher Crassie used to use."

They listened again, for the little boy and the uniformed man were speaking by turns, bowing pleasantly.

"What are you trying to tell us?" Hajjah asked. "Can't you talk any slower? We don't understand you."

The incomprehensible jabbering went on.

"They don't understand us, either," Voileen whispered. She was growing afraid. "They aren't really talking. They're not saying any words. They're just making funny noises. Come on, Haj."

"Wait."

"They're trying to scare us away."

Voileen started to run, but Hajjah caught her by the arm and led her back to face the two picturesque strangers.

"They *are* talking, Voileen," Hajjah said. "They understand each other. There must be more than one way of talking."

Meanwhile the boy and his servant were doing their best—in their own language.

"We're asking you who you are and where you came from. Can't you understand us? What foreign languages do you speak? How did you get here?"

"They don't understand you," said the servant. "They act as if they never saw anyone like us before."

"But how could that be?" the boy asked. "The space port is fifty miles away. They couldn't come here without talking to someone."

"Maybe they've landed in their own ship somewhere in our fields."

The boy turned to gaze toward the mountains.

It was Hajjah's turn to be worried. His instincts for danger sharpened when he saw the little fellow and the uniformed man looking off toward the uplands. Had they already guessed that a digging machine was hidden up there?

Hajjah would have led Voileen away on the double quick. But at that moment she embarked upon interests of her own.

Gently, gracefully, she reached for the gleaming musical instrument in the little fellow's arm.

He smiled and handed it over to her.

She put it to her mouth and tried to sing into it—and most of the hum came through her nose instead of the horn.

But everyone laughed, Voileen most of all; and from that moment on, Hajjah and Voileen knew they were among friends.

XLVIII

THE parents of the "music boy" were not actually the king and queen of this land.

This fact they tried ever so many times to explain to Voileen and Hajjah. But all of these funny conversations were so full of confusion that Ted Green was never sure whether his two guests got rid of their misimpression.

What a curious situation. Here they sat, in the big comfortable living room, marvelling at the wonder and beauties of electric lights and wooden furniture, refrigerators, shower baths, radios.

To them it seemed impossible that one family should own all of these things unless it be the family of a king. For these things were riches beyond measure.

And yet these two strangers, whose eyes were wide from trying to conceive of all these riches, were wearing upon their garments hundreds of precious stones, any one of which would buy this whole mansion.

"You must be the king and queen of your land," Ted Green would tell them. But when he tried to explain his words by pointing to the precious gems on Hajjah's sleeve, the handsome stranger would quickly jerk one of the stones off and hand it over.

Ted Green couldn't help laughing at such unbelievable generosity. Most of the time he refused. But Hajjah wanted to make an exchange, and he persisted until Ted understood. Hajjah wished to exchange a stone for the musical instrument.

"So that's it! You want a trumpet. Very well, tomorrow we'll go into the city and I'll take you to my father's store. For this one stone my father will let you have all the trumpets you want."

And so, on the following day, Hajjah and Voileen found themselves being moved along over the road in a magnificent cart that raced far more swiftly than any fandruff could have pulled it.

The little music boy pointed to the majestic white towers, the very ones that Voileen remembered having seen that first night, trimmed in rows of magic torchlights.

"That's the city," the music boy said, and the big uniformed servant, who was herding the swift cart by turning a wheel, repeated the words, "That's the city."

Voileen smiled and whispered, "They must be saying, 'Roadcrossing'."

Hajjah nodded. Not the least fascinating of all these wonderful experiences was this game of picking up new words. He and Voileen were learning fast.

"That's the city," Hajjah repeated.

But Voileen was watching the great buildings as they seemed to stretch right up into the sky, and she was too breathless to say anything.

XLIX

"SOME of these times we must go back," Hajjah told Voileen one evening after he had watched the sun sink down over the mountain top.

"Some of these times," Voileen echoed casually, "but not too soon. . . . Do you think my playing is any better today than it was yesterday, Haj?"

Hajjah looked at her and smiled. She lay in the hammock languidly, looking up at the sky, watching the stars pop out. Each time she saw a new one she greeted it with a blast on the trumpet.

"I've learned two notes already," she laughed, when she noticed how intently Hajjah was looking at her. "Why don't you get a horn for yourself so that we can both make music."

"Would there be enough stars?" Hajjah asked. He dropped down on the grass and rested his head against the foot of the tree. "They say those stars are other worlds, Leenie."

"I know what you're thinking," Voileen said. She tumbled out of the hammock and sat down beside him. "What's this you were saying about a return to our world? I'm perfectly happy here, Haj. Tomorrow I'll learn another note."

Hajjah laughed at her. "You're very beautiful, Leenie . . . Remember that first day I saw you at school? You were beautiful then, and I told myself that some day I would marry you. . . . You're more beautiful than ever, now."

"They say the starlight helps," Voileen said. "But I think maybe it's these

new clothes. The music boy's mother took me to the city today."

"I'm going to marry you some day soon," Hajjah said quietly. "The people here say that they can see things in the stars — and that's what I see."

Voileen looked up at the deepening blue. "Where do you see anything like that?"

"Up there — don't you see it?"

"I see a rain cloud coming over," said Voileen.

"I've been wondering — must we go back to our own world before we get married. . . . Would it be right for us to be married in this outside world?"

A hint of worry came into Voileen's starlit eyes. For several minutes she made no answer.

"What do you mean — *right?*" she said finally. "If you mean according to the laws of King Witfessal — no, I suppose it wouldn't. Rightfully, we must return to our Witfessal Agent before we can be married."

Hajjah nodded. "That's what I've been thinking."

L

THE hospitality of young Ted Green and his parents was a constant source of amazement to Hajjah. Every day there were new sports — riding, shooting, swimming, lessons in speaking. The latter, perhaps, was the most fun of all. But shooting ranked as a close second.

The flame gun, he learned, was a novel sports weapon. It required skillful handling, much more so than more common types of guns. Therefore it was preferred for sports competitions.

The sensitive trigger of the flame gun made it highly responsive for speedy shooting at short range; but skill at longer range shooting was more difficult to attain, since the rate of travel of the flame became an increasingly important fact with increased distance.

Hajjah's sense of distance had never given him any trouble down in the hollow planet. But in this world most landscapes seemed to be jumping-off places where his distance sense was forever failing him.

Voileen teased him for his poor record in the long distance competitions. But she realized that he was engrossed in the game, much as she was absorbed by her music. And perhaps he was doing as well as she, although she had now mastered eight notes and two simple tunes.

At any rate she clipped a precious stone from her sleeve and bought Hajjah a gleaming flame gun.

And every morning she and the music boy's mother would ride out to the range to see whether the scores were improving.

The music boy would always greet her. He was a happy youngster, her prize friend in this new world. Whenever he saw her coming, he would toot his trumpet five long notes — the next to last one a high one. And she would return the call.

Between the music boy's family and Hajjah and Voileen a remarkable friendship had grown. And all the while, Hajjah realized, these hospitable people had withheld their questions. They knew, of course, that he and Voileen were from some land other than their own. But the secret of their coming had never been revealed.

As mutual confidences grew, Hajjah began to feel ashamed for having held back the story of their coming.

Then one evening, after the group of them had returned from one of those marvelous picture entertainments that brought actual scenes of space travel among various planets, the music boy's father turned his curiosity loose with a

few straight-forward questions.

"We have never heard any language like yours. Would you like to tell us which planet you came from? And how you happened to land so near us? And how it is that no one in this vicinity has seen any space ship?"

"Voileen and I," Hajjah smiled, "will be glad to tell you anything you wish to know."

Little Ted Green jumped at the chance. From the first his parents had silenced his questioning. In those days the language barrier had made talk almost impossible. But by now that barrier had been largely dissolved.

"I want to know where you got all those precious stones. Did you buy them at some space port, or do you have them at home?"

"We have them at home," Voileen laughed. "They are so common that no one thinks anything about them. They can be picked up anywhere."

"I have never heard of a planet with such riches," the father said. "What planet could it be?"

"This planet," said Voileen. "The inside of it. That's our Wanzuura — our world. A million of us live there."

LI

THE music boy and Hajjah led the way up the mountainside. Every few minutes the little fellow would blow the five-blast call to make sure the rest of the party was coming, and Voileen would answer.

Soon the group of them were gathered at what seemed to be the warmest spot on the mountainside, for they were all perspiring from the hot climb in the noonday sun.

"That was our entrance," Hajjah said. "The machine you see was made by Voileen's great-grandfather. He started the tunnel. She was trying to finish it by herself — "

"When Haj came to the rescue," Voileen interpolated.

The grownups of the party were speechless with amazement. They had heard the whole story the night before. They had listened spellbound. How strange, to realize that all these years there had existed another civilization — completely out of their sight — and yet only twenty "dunes" away.

And to think that these million people were living a simple existence on such scanty animal and plant life as could be made to thrive upon the rock walls of a planet's interior was almost beyond comprehension.

The music boy's father was a forward-looking business man and the questions he had asked about the products of the inner world, its simple industries, and its growing need for food, had been extremely penetrating. Hajjah had been surprised at his quick grasp of the situation.

But as to whether or not it would be feasible to transport food to this inside world, Ted Green's father did not commit himself.

It was only now, as the party gazed at the narrow opening among the stones, that the matter of food came in for another mention.

The music boy, crawling up out of the mouth of the tunnel, began jumping around gleefully.

"I'll take them some food myself, Leenie," the little fellow said. "That tunnel is plenty big for my toy wagon. And I have dozens of friends with wagons. If you ever go back, you tell them we're coming with some food."

Voileen smiled. "If we ever go back."

MOMBAL stood inside the palace watching the blue and red robes assemble.

On the palace grounds the Agents

were gathering for the feast. It might have been termed a convention by Randolph Hill if he had lived to witness it.

Or he might have called it a riot. Even among the dignified Witfessal Agents well-laid plans could go astray.

The undercurrent of enmity between Mombal and Ecker was now a matter of common knowledge among these professional men who tilled the intellectual fields of Wanzuura. Mombal had noted their reactions carefully.

His hint that this feast would do honors to the late assistant, Nome, had met with full approval.

His suggestion that further honors were to be bestowed upon Ecker was likewise favored. It was agreed that Ecker deserved honors for refusing to follow Voileen into the cave, and for his willingness to give her up when her escape had been cut off.

But no one except Mombal had observed the satisfied light in Ecker's eyes when people would say, "Poor Nome — how sad that he, too, should have been locked in the cave. But such cruel fate must be expected when one trifles with right and wrong."

The banquet was well attended. Other than the several hundred Agents who found their places at the rows of tables, there were a few thousand spectators who crowded against the outside of the fences.

It was a rare sight to see so much fish being served. The thousands of onlookers watched with hungry eyes. Here and there a desperate beggar dared to climb the fence, hoping to seize a fish for himself before the guards would see him and club him back.

After a few such trouble makers had been driven away with bashed and bleeding heads, the mob spirit held itself in check.

Mombal arose, at the proper time, and spoke to the assemblage. His reference to Ecker's latest honor was put slyly. It evoked slight smiles from a few of the Agents. As a general rule Agents were not given to smiling, owing to the serious nature of their work.

If any of them suspected that Ecker's new honors were questionable, Ecker himself set their suspicions aside. When he had marched up to the speaker's station on the palace porch, he unleashed such an emotional oration that even the beggars fell silent and thoughtful.

If the program had ended there all might have been well.

But the waiters brought on more fish. And that was too much for the hungry people outside the fence.

They began yelling and stamping.

"Fish — fish — give us fish!"

In a few moments their cries turned into a rhythmic chant and the Agents could no longer ignore them. Along with the rhythm of their chant they began to march.

They marched in circles, they seesawed close against the fence, and at last they straightened their ranks and moved straight for the gate.

The Agents shouted at each other in alarm. Something must be done. This was highly irregular.

"Stop serving fish," some of the Agents cried.

But by this time many of the waiters were giving way to their own impulses, tossing fish to the flood of waving hands.

Some Agents followed the example of the waiters. Others gobbled the last of their tasty dishes, thinking to thwart the mob by removing the prize.

LII

IT WAS Ecker who came nearest to getting the angry multitude under control. His magnetic manners, prac-

ticed on the stage, were calculated to play upon people's emotional weaknesses.

Two friends boosted him to the porch roof where everyone could see him. With one hand he held a fish aloft, with the other he managed to command silence.

"You are right," he cried, "to want food. King Witfessal knows your needs."

His words argued that he understood their plight. Perhaps the King would provide. They listened.

"But your methods are wrong. Let me tell you what to do if you want fish."

An eager clamor was their response, slightly less violent than before. A promise of food seemed to be on its way.

"These Agents of yours have fish because they stand in favor with King Witfessal," Ecker shouted. "Why? Because they study the Laws. Very well, my worthy people. That is what you must do. Study your Laws. Then you will deserve fish. And not one of you can doubt that King Witfessal will provide."

For an instant there was an impressive silence. How could there be any answer to what Ecker had said? His argument clung to them — almost.

But one voice hooted, and the psychological scales tipped.

It was the voice of Mooburkle. Lean and hungry, rankling with the memory of Bolt's fate, he burst out with a mocking yell.

"Where does the King keep his fish? I'm hungry."

Immediately three or four others joined the shouting. In a moment the whole mob broke loose, stamping, waving, crying all sorts of vulgar taunts.

Never had Wanzuura witnessed such an explosion of blasphemies. The Agents were horrified and deathly afraid. This angry mob was on the verge of rushing in and committing wholesale violence.

For once Ecker demonstrated that he was helpless. He stood on the roof of the palace porch waving in protest, shouting at his friends to do something.

"Find Mombal!" he wailed. "Let Mombal turn them back if he can."

A moment later Mombal was boosted up to the roof perch beside Ecker.

"Can't you charm them?" the little old mystic asked. "Where's your eloquence? Why don't you recite the Laws?"

Ecker snorted. "Let's see you tame them."

LIII

MOMBAL did it. He began with a few swift mysterious antics that looked for all the world as if he meant to call down a blast of lightning.

On the instant the surging mob jerked backward. The raucous voices changed to subdued, frightened whispers. "The High Servant himself!" "What is he going to do?" "Keep back till we see."

With his blue and red robe flashing in the light, the weird little old High Servant paced from one end of the porch roof to the other. His voice burst forth with spine-tingling vocal explosions.

Now, that his mad multitude was silent and attentive, he eased into an impromptu address.

His words were like a spray of fire. In comparison, Ecker's effort had been cold.

Ecker, who had by this time bounced down off the porch roof, stood amazed to see what a genius could do. It was plain that this old mystic had them eating out of his hand.

And yet, in truth, Mombal was as uncertain as anyone how long he could

hold the flood of fury in check. The mob's violence had only been postponed. Mombal's powers had been proved, but now he was forced into an endurance test. With supreme poise he carried on.

If only something would happen *away* from the banquet, he thought, to turn their thoughts from fish!

If only an unseasonal rain would dash down or a sudden windstorm would sweep over the mountains—or if even a group of traveling players would hail in sight on a distant road.

But Mombal knew none of these things was likely to come to his rescue. He must keep on speaking, packing his admonitions with simple, honest emotions, in the hope of softening these hungry, degraded people.

He did not mention food.

Neither did he make any appeals to King Witfessal.

A strange oversight, perhaps, considering that he was dealing with the problem of hunger.

But within himself, Mombal was arguing his secret thoughts:

"If they were able to listen to reason," he told himself, "I would put the proposition to them directly. I would tell them Crassie was right—and so was his father before him. The problem of a coming famine must be faced.

"But they'd be in no mood to hear such blasphemies from me—in spite of their own outbursts. I must tell them nothing.

"And yet I must soon devise a plan to give them food. Even if some of us overfed ones must deny ourselves, their cry must be answered.

"But how can I offer a plan, the Law being what it is? There is only one way. *I must receive a vision from the King—and soon.*"

These thoughts were only within Mombal's mind. All the while he was orating with all his strength, keeping his great audience spellbound.

The shoulders and chest of his highly colored robe became soaked with perspiration. His streaming face grew whiter. His waving arms began to tremble.

"How much longer can he go on?" the Agents whispered to each other. "He'll kill himself with such a speech. He's too old for such exertion." "But if he stops, we may be killed underfoot, with beggars stampeding over us."

Mombal began to weave dizzily. Several times he almost fell.

Then the something that he had hoped for came to his rescue.

From half a dune down the road there sounded a clear sharp musical note unlike anything ever heard before in the hollow planet.

It was the blast of a trumpet.

LIV

THE trumpet notes rang out. The sharp singing tones were full of shivers for the massed multitude. Such weird blasts of music had never been heard in this realm before.

Mooburkle, perched on the palace gate, was the first to recognize where the noise was coming from. He pointed down to the figures coming up the hill road.

"It looks like Voileen!" he cried. "Yes—Voileen and Hajjah!"

The people were already turning, and gawking this way and that. Many who heard Moo were not convinced. But others were already shouting. "Voileen and Hajjah! They're alive!"

The restless crowd strained to get a glimpse. The pressure against the palace gates was quickly relieved. The mob dissolved into a scattering of small, nervous, talkative groups spread across the hillside.

Everyone wanted to see. Were the newcomers really Voileen and Hajjah? No one who got close enough could doubt it.

But everyone was cautious. Those strange contraptions were alarming to the eyes as well as the ears.

In addition to the trumpet blasts there was the rumbling of a bright metallic contraption which crawled along beside Voileen and Hajjah. It looked like a monstrous animal made of bright metal, and its roar was a cross between a low musical hum and the sullen echoes of thunder.

Hajjah and Voileen came marching right up the hillside toward the crowd. A few women began to scream with fright, and brave men were seen to run for the nearest fields of tall dravoth.

But the majority of the onlookers were sure, from the broad smiles on the faces of Voileen and Hajjah, that there was no danger. And so, out of the mob of hungry people, there arose a wild cheering.

Here was excitement that made them forget themselves. The lost had returned!

LV

THE official welcome came from Mombal. His lusty voice rang from the porch roof.

"Voileen! Hajjah! Come up. Let us see you!"

Voileen flashed a smile at Hajjah, and together they climbed the path, through the forest of dizzily joyful spectators.

Most of the cheerers, Hajjah noticed, lapsed into breathless silence when he and Voileen passed close to them. They were fascinated by the flashing beauty of the golden trumpet she carried. They were obviously afraid of the digging machine. And they took no notice of the metal instrument he wore at his side.

Mombal was still motioning his welcome, and the palace gate was open. There sat Moo, looking down at them with eyes that almost dropped out.

"What's going on here, Moo?" Hajjah called, against the roar of voices. "I never saw such a crowd."

"It was trouble till you came," Moo stammered. "Now it'll be more trouble. But anyway you're not dead—yet."

"What did he mean—*yet?*" Voileen whispered, but the tumult of welcome drowned her question.

A little farther on, Hajjah caught sight of some old schoolday friends, who called to him.

"Don't know where you managed to hide all this time, Hajjah." "What kind of trick is this? We thought you were dead." "Voileen, I could cry, I'm so glad to see you."

Among the throng Hajjah caught sight of Zaywoodie, the herder, whose deep, honest eyes were trying to tell him something. The lips formed the words, "Ecker. Look out for Ecker."

LVI

EVERYONE was on fire with curiosity Mombal, the Agents, and Ecker no less than Mooburkle and the hungry beggars.

Now, the crowds poured in at the gates or hurdled the fences. They packed in as tightly around the steps of the palace porch as room would permit. But no one climbed on the porch, where Hajjah, Voileen, and Mombal were now standing.

That was the natural stage for the inevitable interview. At present Mombal was busy silencing the barrage of questions that were being flung by the ringsiders. At the same time those thousands who had mounted chairs or

tables or were pressing at the outskirts of the throng were shouting that they wanted to hear, too.

The pandemonium was terrifying to Hajjah and Violeen. For all the excitement, these two could not be sure whether the news they were about to deliver would be wholeheartedly received.

That was something that Hajjah had pondered all the way back. "Will they appreciate us? Or will they be suspicious?"

At last he was about to find out.

He nudged Violeen. "Mombal's having trouble silencing them. Can you help him?"

Voileen lifted the trumpet to her lips and blew a short blast. Her free hand gestured for silence. The multitude responded beautifully. The voices died away until the last tense whisper fell silent.

Hajjah was fascinated by the bright light in Mombal's eyes as the little old mystic began questioning them.

"You have been gone for a whole season, Voileen and Hajjah," he said. "The people believed you had come to death in the tunnel before this. Tell us, where have you been? Speak up, Hajjah."

"We have been in the tunnel—and beyond."

"Beyond!" The whispers through the audience echoed his word.

"Did you find these noise instruments in the tunnel?" Mombal asked.

"The digging instrument," Hajjah pointed to the silent, mysterious metal contraption which occupied the center of the porch, "was found in the tunnel. It was left by Crassie and his father to Voileen so she could go on with the work they started."

"And these other things," Mombal pursued, pointing to the musical instrument and the metallic instrument which hung at Hajjah's side, "were they also found in the tunnel?"

"They came from beyond."

"What do you mean, beyond?"

"The new world," said Hajjah, "that lies at the other end of the tunnel."

The murmurs of the audience swelled to a rumble that was like thunder. But there was a questioning rather than a threat in the massed voices.

Hajjah continued, and an eager silence attended his straightforward words.

"The discovery is Violeen's. She carried out the plan of her forefathers. I only helped her."

"But together we got there," Voileen broke in impulsively. Her blue eyes were dancing. "And the new world is so wonderful and beautiful. And there's food—the finest of fish in abundance!"

Up swelled the appreciative murmur until it was like the roar of a storm. Questions poured forth from the lips of every listener. Where was this world? How did one get there? Was the journey easy? How long would it take?

Before the crowd could be brought to order, Hajjah saw that a few parties were slipping toward the outer edge and from there were turning to cast their eyes across the hills toward Crassie's house.

But at the very moment that some of these half-starved or over-eager persons appeared to be on the verge of starting a footrace toward the tunnel, a clap of thunder chanced to echo across from some distant clouds. That coincidence had its effect. It was a sharp reminder that tunnels and outer worlds were still a direct contradiction to the Laws.

The near-deserters drifted back. Hajjah watched them. He realized, then, what a tight hold the native superstitions had upon all his people. For those men were hungry.

LVII

THEN and there, Mombal tackled superstition by both horns.

"Before we go any further with our questions about this world you have seen," Mombal said, "I must ask you about some other matters, Hajjah and Voileen. For the present I shall not say whether or not I believe that you have found a new world—"

"Of course we found it!" Voileen said impetuously. "We brought back these things to prove—"

"I do not deny that you have returned with some most interesting novelties," said Mombal. "But first of all, what have you to say regarding your attitude toward the Laws?"

Hajjah saw that Voileen was nearing an outburst of rage. He also saw that Ecker, standing only a few paces down from the porch steps, was taking sadistic pleasure in seeing her thus tortured.

"Speak up, Hajjah," said Mombal.

"I haven't anything to say about the Laws," Hajjah retorted. "They are all right, I suppose, as far as they go. But they don't extend to this outer world."

"There is no outer world!" This came from Ecker. He said it as if for himself. But Hajjah knew that he intended Mombal to hear.

Mombal heard, and was not disturbed by the interruption in the slightest.

"It would seem to be your attitude," Mombal said, "that these Laws which have served us so well for generations past should now be expanded to embrace your new discoveries."

"Yes, they should," said Hajjah.

"Blasphemy!" came the low snarl from Ecker. *"He wants to change our laws. The lightning will strike him for that!"*

The little old mystic smiled gently and continued. "Hajjah, you and Voileen are persons of extraordinary courage. How could you dare to go into that tunnel, when you knew—as everyone knows—that a young boy named Bolt was killed for less?"

"But who killed him?" Hajjah flung the answer with venom.

"The lightning," Ecker called, continuing his off-stage interpolations.

"Who do you think killed him, Hajjah?" Mombal asked.

"I know who killed him," Hajjah's rage-filled voice carried out to the whole multitude. "Ecker murdered him —and then put the blame on King Witfessal."

LVIII

THE uproar which this shocking challenge caused could not be quelled with an order or a gesture. Again the tightly packed crowd had to make way for some of its members. A number of those nearest the porch gave up their places. This talk was enough to bring down the lightning, they reasoned, and they wanted to be out of the way.

Mombal again employed the trick of exciting curiosity among the eager throngs, and once more they became perfectly silent. For he had brought out of his robe a mysterious black instrument. He held it up to his face.

Hajjah and Voileen recognized the instrument to be binoculars.

"Crassie's gift to him," Voileen whispered. "They were handed down from Hill."

Mombal motioned Hajjah and Voileen to the rear of the porch, and he himself stepped forward, speaking in a loud voice.

"All of you know that the young boy Bolt was struck down. I am about to pronounce my official judgment upon that death. But first I want several of

you to see what I have here. Ecker, Grannz, Zaywoodie . . ."

Mombal proceeded to call fifteen persons to the porch. He allowed each of these, in turn, to look through the field glasses.

To the audience he announced that from this distance, with this instrument, he could tell what people all over the surrounding land were doing. In proof, he told a number of persons in the audience what he saw at their houses or farms.

"Your child is fishing in the marshes. . . . Your wife is washing clothes . . . (And to another) Your wife is wearing a jeweled coak . . . (To another) Your husband is felling dravoth stalks, and his blade is dull."

Wherever he looked along the vast upsweep of landscape he succeeded in making a startling observation.

Those in the audience who were too far back to understand how he achieved these miracles were no less convinced that he was performing them with uncanny accuracy.

"King Witfessal has given him special eyes," they would say, "so that he sees everything."

The psychological moment was ripe. Mombal turned to one of the men he had called to the stage.

"Now, Zaywoodie, and the rest of you, listen closely. I saw the young boy Bolt at the time he was struck to the ground."

The audience listened tensely.

"I saw it exactly as it happened," Mombal said coldly. "And I know that you, Zaywoodie, also saw it happen. For you were there. Am I right?"

"High Servant of the King, you are correct," said Zaywoodie, gulping with fright.

"Then I demand that you tell all people, in the name of King Witfessal, how you saw it happen."

"Er—now?"

"Tell it now," said Mombal.

Hajjah saw the old herder shrink from the awful thing that he must do. But in a tight voice he blurted his testimony.

"Ecker struck Bolt down with a club —and it—it killed him."

"WAAA!" Ecker burst out with a roar that would have done justice to a dying fandruff. He swung his open hands through the air, gesturing his outrage at such absurd talk.

The shock of all this talk threw the audience into utter confusion. Ecker's popularity as an actor and a defender of the Laws was a weighty factor.

And now Ecker's very actions seemed to prove that this story was entirely foreign to him. He was shouting, "Waaa! Waaa!" at everyone, trying to drown out the talk. But the "Waaa!" he yelled at Voileen brought a sharp retort in the form of a stinging blast from the trumpet.

Mombal regained the stage. "You have heard Zaywoodie's story. Let me add that I saw the whole episode just as he related it. Our esteemed friend Ecker was wearing this same bright red coat which I once gave him. It was not at all difficult to observe his brand of lightning."

And still Ecker tried to deny the charge. His oratorical success had equipped him with perhaps too much bravado for his own good. And so he stormed and shouted like a man gone mad. He hurled a broadside straight at Mombal.

"You're defying the King with these lies. The lightning will strike you."

"Silence, Ecker!" Mombal commanded. "And don't try to leave us. I have more to say to you. Come back here—"

Ecker, backing away to the farther

edge of the porch, hesitated. He was caught between the impulse to run and the compulsion to stay and justify himself.

"Your lies will strike you down, Mombal!" His face grew purple with uncontrolled rage. "Witfessal! Witfessal! He's *calling* me! He wants to tell me!!! *I'm coming, Witfessal!* I'm —"

Ecker darted into the palace and raced through the rooms and fled out one of the rear doors.

LIX

"LET me!" Hajjah shouted. "I'll bring him back!"

On the instant Hajjah was off. He pounded through the palace, over the noisy old floors of the rear porch, and bounded down the road.

Ecker was many paces ahead of him. But three of Ecker's friends who might have joined forces quickly reconsidered. Hajjah was already ahead of them, and they whirled back to lose themselves in the crowd.

A few of the Agents, Hajjah saw in passing, were doing their utmost to help him overtake the runaway. But the majority of them, like the rest of the multitude, was too nearly paralyzed over the sharp turn of events to collect its wits.

Anyway, Hajjah thought, they would all have time to think it over before he got back.

Ecker ran for the tall dravoth.

Hajjah saw him plough straight into it. The tracks would be easy to follow. Unless the marsh was very dry the runaway would soon find it slow going.

But the sound of Ecker's hard footsteps proved that he knew better than to run the risk of bogging down. He was back on the road again, chasing pell-mell toward the old school pen. His head bobbed in sight for a moment as he clattered over the old footbridge.

Hajjah cut off a corner of the road, leaped clear of the little stream, and was back on the trail. But his speed was not up to standard. He was lugging too much surplus weight in the form of souvenirs from the outer world. The flame gun bumped heavily against his side.

Suddenly it dawned on Hajjah that Ecker was heading for Crassie's house. So he was convinced, in spite of all his talk of blasphemy!

Yes, in his heart Ecker knew that the new world must be a fact. Otherwise why should he hope to escape by this route? Why didn't he head for the mountains—*instead of a closed tunnel?*

LX

HAJJAH put on a full burst of speed. He didn't intend letting this pursuit lead into the tunnel if there was any possible way of avoiding it.

Obviously Ecker had guessed that the mouth of the tunnel had been broken open. Ecker was clever. He had been clever from the first. Cleverness and lying had been his game—forcing things down the throats of common people which he himself didn't believe.

Yes, he had committed his murders in the name of King Witfessal. He had climbed to popularity by condemning Crassie. But now he was turning to Crassie begging for escape. Well, he wouldn't get it.

Hajjah slackened his speed long enough to unsnap the flame gun from his belt.

"Come back, Ecker! If you don't, I'll stop you with lightning! Come back!"

Ecker was becoming winded, but his

feet kept pounding the road, and the cloud of dust boiled up to eclipse all of him but the soles of his boots.

Hajjah's throat went dry and tight with dust. He had lost ground. And now the runaway made a shortcut over a heap of stones.

This time Hajjah took the long curve of the well beaten trail. It gave him the chance he wanted. Gripping the flame gun, he shot a stream of fire across the path that Ecker must cross.

Ecker stopped short, within a dozen bounds of Crassie's house.

"Lightning!" Hajjah shouted. "Come back with me. I don't want to use it on you — "

Ecker's eyes were narrow and hard.

"You wouldn't!"

"Don't be too sure."

"You couldn't afford to singe a hair of my head, you low fandruff herder. You saw how they acted. They couldn't stand to think of me as a murderer. But you — they'd love it, after all the trouble you've caused."

"You're the one who's made the trouble," Hajjah said bitterly. "I'm the one that's worn the black eyes."

"That's right." An arrogant smile touched Ecker's lips. "That's the way we started and that's how we're going to keep on. I'd be lost without your eyes to black, Hajjah. And you — you wouldn't dare harm a hair of my head — and neither would that blathering fish of a High Servant."

Ecker paused, turned to look back over the path he had just come.

"Speaking of Mombal, we're going to have company."

Hajjah barely glanced to the side. In almost the same split second he jumped to dodge the flying stone that Ecker threw on the run. Ecker lunged across the remaining space and darted through the half open door of what had once been Crassie's house.

Hajjah's flame gun went into action.

The first spurt of white fire caught a bit of old dry dravoth mat somewhere in an inner room. Ecker leaped back to see the flames burst up in front of him.

The line of fire swung to one side, to avoid catching Ecker with a direct shot. Hajjah still had hopes of delivering his prize to Mombal, alive and sound.

Ecker made four attempts in rapid succession to gain the tunnel entrance. Each time Hajjah forced him back with a stream of fire. But in a matter of moments the whole house was engulfed in flames.

"Let me out of here! In the name of King Witfessal, let me out!"

Through the masses of yellow flame that crackled over the front doorway, Hajjah could see the pitiful face of his old enemy, white with rage and terror.

"Come on," Hajjah shouted through clenched teeth. "We're going back."

LXI

IT WOULDN'T be quite accurate to say that Mombal's public questioning went on as if nothing had happened. There had been a few changes.

The multitude of onlookers was the same as before, and now that the blazes in the distance had almost finished devouring Crassie's house, that multitude was ready to go on where it had left off. The people packed in close around the palace porch and grew respectfully attentive.

Voileen still stood there, as pretty as ever, ready to silence the crowd with a blast from the trumpet if it should become necessary.

Mombal was still in command, perhaps more confident of himself than ever before in his career, though one could never be sure of his inner feelings. At this very moment the people were

sizing him up anew. His recent bout with the popular young Ecker had proved the little old mystic packed hidden powers. Mombal paced back and forth, gesturing with the hand that held the field glasses.

Hajjah had brought Ecker back, and the two of them were once more standing calmly at the rear center of the wide porch, just back of the electric digging-and-disintegrating machine.

Hajjah was all nerves. This reception had been utterly unlike his expectations. He had hoped for wholehearted rejoicing on the part of all Wanzuurans as soon as they heard the news.

But instead they were steeped in argument, confusion, and deep ponderings. The big news couldn't quite be comprehended. In spite of the "proofs" Voileen and he had brought, the people acted as if they preferred not to believe. A rumble of faraway thunder was warning enough to make them settle back into their old ways of thinking. Into their old beliefs. Into their old confidence that everything was known and recorded in their Laws.

Yes, the old ways were easier.

And so the whole question of whether or not a new world had been discovered had been twisted into other questions:

Had King Witfessal been insulted by this exploration for a new world?

Had King Witfessal declared himself by hurling lightning?

And finally, who had killed Bolt?

Mombal himself had jolted the public curiosity through this series of leaps. Perhaps he had done so intentionally and cleverly.

At any rate, the final question had been answered. And now the murderer of Bolt stood on the porch. His eyes, Hajjah noticed, were continually chasing from the flame gun to the porch pillars, to the lakes and mountains in the distant upturned landscape, down across the crowd with a swift sweep, over the porch floor, and back to the flame gun.

It was Ecker's manner, more than any other one thing, that had changed during the runaway interlude.

FOR now Ecker stood as a proven murderer. And, as the meeting progressed, it was quickly proved that he had killed Nome as well as Bolt. Moreover, as the full story of his attack upon Nome was reviewed, it became obvious to all listeners that the murder had been meant for Mombal.

Again Mombal's binoculars came into the picture. Though Mombal had not seen the actual murder of Nome, he had seen the murderer's effort to hide the body. And this special knowledge Mombal had shared with a few trusted Agents, who had then gone at once to the marshes and found the ghastly proof of the deed.

The Agents had given Nome a respectful burial in private, and at Mombal's request had kept the whole matter a secret until now.

Ecker couldn't help listening while these events were reviewed. His eyes kept shifting.

The people watched him expectantly. They naturally expected him to break under the strain. All of this shame had descended upon him so swiftly. And he was the handsome young actor who was so near to becoming the High Servant of the King.

All at once he straightened. He took a strong confident step toward Mombal. His arm extended dramatically. He called out in his stern stage voice — the voice that had made all of these people tingle to their fingertips during his days of acting.

"It all comes to me now, Mombal . . . Hand me your instrument of vision. I demand the right to examine it again."

LXII

MOMBAL handed over the binoculars.

Ecker put them to his eyes and began sweeping the landscape.

Hajjah kept his gun ready. There was trickery afoot, he was certain.

Voileen's frightened whisper was courage to Hajjah's ears. "Don't let him get between you and the crowd, Haj . . . He knows you wouldn't dare throw flames into the crowd."

"I'm watching him," Hajjah said, and he maneuvered accordingly. Even when Ecker was fully engrossed in studying the scenery he maintained a healthy respect for the flame gun.

"He's working on the crowd again," Voileen whispered. "They're mystified. He's going to make them believe the instrument is false."

"But those men who tried it proved it true."

"There were fifteen of them. There are thousands in this crowd. And that's too many. They can't see for themselves. They'll have to take someone's word."

"Is there any reason they should take his?"

"It's his voice and his acting," Voileen whispered. "Watch him."

Ecker took the binoculars from his eyes slowly. He turned them over in his hand. The crowd waited breathlessly for what he might say. He laughed.

"What a hoax. This instrument is nothing but two pieces of hollow dravoth painted black and filled with mud."

Ecker's mocking laughter brought a murmur of amusement from the audience. His old friend Grannz laughed louder than anyone.

Hajjah caught the quick meaningful glance that passed between Ecker and Grannz. Then Ecker was bellowing to the people again with the same old bravado, apparently unshaken.

"How silly we are, to allow trifling lies to shake our solid faith in our Laws. How stupid we are to allow faithless men to occupy this palace — men who enjoy fastening crimes upon the innocent. My dear people, I wish each of you could look — but all you could see would be the figments of your own imaginations."

Mombal was shaking his head vigorously. "It's too late, Ecker. Your game can't be saved."

But Ecker, paying no attention, called to Grannz.

"Step up here, Grannz, my good man. You are an honest fandruff herder. Look into this instrument and tell me what you see."

Grannz marched up the porch steps and took the binoculars.

"If you see anything — anything at all," Ecker urged, "tell us what it is."

For a long moment Grannz looked, frowning and shaking his head. But suddenly his elbows jerked tight against his sides and he stared as if he were frozen.

"I see *something*, all right. Never saw anything like it before."

LXIII

"IT'S all your imagination," Ecker shouted. "Those sticks are full of mud. . . . What do you think you see?"

"I *know* I see it!" Grannz yelled, jerking the binoculars down from his eyes. "I can even see it *now*."

"What is it?"

"It's long and winding, and it's made up of people," Grannz was again looking through the binoculars, "and it's coming this way."

Hajjah heard Voileen gasp. He crossed in front of the digging machine

so that he could look in the direction indicated without relaxing his guard upon Ecker.

Grannz was right, something was coming that was long and winding and made up of people. It was a caravan, rising out of the black ashes of what had once been Crassie's house.

"The music boy!" Hajjah heard Voileen cry. "He's come to see us already."

She lifted the trumpet to her lips and blew five long notes, the fourth one a high one.

From the head of the caravan a brisk little figure stepped far out in front.

Perhaps no one but Ecker, who again held the binoculars, could see the little figure raise a gleaming trumpet to his lips.

But everyone heard the answering blast—five long notes, the next to last one a high one.

From that moment on the meeting was Voileen's. She couldn't hold back her enthusiasm. She began shouting at the people the very things they wanted to hear.

"They're our friends—*friends from the outside world!* They've come to bring us food! . . . Wait . . . Wait . . . Don't run toward them. You'll scare them away!"

She blew the trumpet again, and with the aid of Mombal she succeeded in holding the hungry multitude in order.

"They have food in abundance. There'll be plenty for everyone. You can see that. All those little wagons—and they're still coming! Stay where you are. The Agents will form you in lines."

Voileen punctuated her orders with trumpet blasts, and each time the little trumpeteer at the head of the long caravan made answer. By this time the astounding sight had grown into a dune-long caravan, moving slowly up the hill.

Voileen turned triumphantly to Mombal.

"Does anyone still doubt that we found another world?"

Mombal's sly smile was a fair indication that his doubts had never existed.

"I used to be a friend of your grandfather Crassie," he told her, out of hearing of anyone else. "He and I learned many things from that great man we speak of as Madman Hill."

"Then you've known all along that this new world was waiting to be discovered."

"Yes," said Mombal. "And I've known it would be discovered. But such a revolutionary discovery is bound to be dangerous. That's why I didn't dare reveal my own convictions. Men like Ecker get their lives so deeply rooted in changeless dogmas that they would rather do murder than give ground."

"I must go and greet the caravan," Voileen said, seeing that the line of men and wagons was nearing the top of the hill. "But first, Mombal, what are you going to do with Ecker?"

"I don't know. He's too dangerous to go free. From the look of him at this moment I would say he is already planning more trouble."

"Please do something." Nervous tears filled the girl's eyes. "I know he'll strike Hajjah down the first time he gets a chance. He'll kill him like he killed my father. He's always been mad with jealousy. Now, after all that's happened, he'll take his revenge out on anyone."

"You're right," said Mombal gravely. "No one would be safe. He'll hurl his whole treacherous strength against us. The wonder is that he still stands there—"

But Mombal didn't finish his private conversation with Voileen, for Ecker

chose that moment to go berserk.

LXIV

ECKER began by smashing the binoculars to the floor. There followed a rapid-fire series of destructive acts, in such swift succession that those who saw the event would talk about it to the end of their days.

They would remember that he had almost gone to pieces once or twice before. But in his previous outbursts he had snatched at certain symbols of respectability as if in a panic to retain the good graces of the thousands who were watching him.

But at last the thousands were no longer watching him. Only the few who were still waiting on or near the porch. His inevitable break had held back until now.

It had been planned in the back of his mind. The speed and precision of his violent acts proved as much.

He smashed the binoculars to the floor, at the same time leaping forward. His new position was toward the crowd, and Hajjah didn't dare use the flame gun to force him back.

On the next instant Ecker knocked the trumpet from Voileen's hands. It clanged to the porch floor. He jerked a dravoth bar from the porch railing and used it as a club on the trumpet and the binoculars.

He swung about swiftly. He was obviously bent on destroying every visible evidence of the new world that he could bring within reach.

He began clubbing the digging machine.

By this time Hajjah and a dozen others were shouting at him to stop his madness. But madness was what he wanted.

The power of Ecker's swift blows upon the machine was something to marvel at. The dravoth club broke in his hands.

It broke and struck the starting lever. The digging machine leaped into action with a fearful zooommmm!

Hajjah dropped his gun and sprang to catch the lever.

But before the lever could be snapped off, the machine plowed squarely into Ecker and drilled him to pieces.

LXV

IN TIME to come, there would be legends concerning Ecker's frightful exit from life. Of those who actually saw it happen a few would remember that the machine showered sparks of lightning. For some, these sparks would become the lightning of King Witfessal, as the story was retold.

However, all Wanzuuran legends were due to take twists and turns under the impact of the newly found world.

In spite of all the talk and turmoil that the new traffic with the outside was destined to bring about, Mombal carried on with his fair and tolerant policies.

His people were encouraged to interpret the mysteries of life as they pleased. They could be dogmatic if the wished. He, himself, could not be quite so positive about anything as had been some ancient predecessor named Witfessal.

Nevertheless, for the benefit of the many persons who were deeply and sincerely disturbed over all this talk of an outside world, Mombal performed an unforgettable favor. He did all that any fair-minded High Servant could have done under the circumstances.

He made an official pronouncement.

He declared that shortly before the

discovery he had received a vision from King Witfessal. In it the King had hinted that soon more food would be needed; that it would be an act both wise and good for someone to dig a passage in search of a new supply.

Eventually this sanction became embodied in the changeless Laws, which were, in reality, continually expanding to keep up with the new needs of the people. As their horizons expanded, so did their Laws.

Randolph Hill would have enjoyed watching these developments.

He would have been gratified to see the Wanzuurans open commerce with the outside world, exchanging their sparkling stones for food.

He would have appreciated Hajjah's plan for enlarging the outer half of the tunnel (as he and Crassie had done with the inner).

These were things which everyone came to approve in time.

Above all, their fullest approvals and blessings were bestowed upon the marriage of Hajjah and Voileen.

Forgotten were the bygone days of cuffs and slaps, the struggle to be respected in spite of being courageous. Hajjah's strength and bravery, he was surprised to learn, had made him the object of every Agent's praise.

Voileen, too, was amazed at the new esteem in which the people held her. Not only had her deeds won her the highest of honors, her ancestors had won her a sort of reverence.

Was she not the great-granddaughter of that genius named Hill, who had been mysteriously drawn into this world by King Witfessal himself?

"To hear the folks talk, you'd think that you two had been heroes all along," Mooburkle would say.

To which Voileen would retort, "And what would have happened if my Haj had listened to you and failed to join me in the tunnel?"

"We'd all have starved to death." Moo grinned like a foolish fandruff. "Don't ever listen to the advice of a starving friend. . . . By the way, Haj, I hear that Mombal wants you to succeed him as High Servant. I advise you to start training for the job."

"More bad advice. You must be hungry," Hajjah laughed. "Voileen and I are explorers, not High Servants. The world's are out there, waiting."

LXVI

HILL'S NOTEBOOK: I wish I could live to see it happen. It will happen, of course. Sooner or later these people are going to find their way out.

When they do, what a change there'll be in their whole concept of life! What a lot of questions they'll ask!

They may even stop to wonder how they ever got into this hollow planet in the first place. Frankly, that one has me stumped.

THE END.

« SO THAT PARALYTICS MAY WALK »

PROBABLY the worst after-effect of infantile paralysis is that the patient is usually left with one leg shorter than the other. Thus, the patient has to walk the rest of his life with a very noticeable limp. Efforts to correct this limp with various surgical operations have been tried with only varying success.

It was very good news, therefore, when Dr. Davis Spangler, of Dallas, Texas, issued a report that he had had success with X-ray treatment in combatting the crippling effect of infantile paralysis. He treated four patients in the Scottish Rites Hospital for Crippled Children with X-rays to stop the growth in the normal leg so that both legs would grow to the same length. He reported that, although the X-ray treatments require more time, their effect is more uniform than an operation.

NEPTUNE—World of Ice

by WILLY LEY

A scientist looks across the void and gives us a vivid picture of the surface of Neptune

No. 7

THE average temperature is 220 degrees centigrade below the freezing point of water, or just 53 degrees centigrade above absolute zero. And the intensity of the sun's rays is almost exactly one tenth of one per cent of what it is on a cloudless day on Earth. That is still many times as bright as the light of the full moon; vision is unimpaired. But the sky is dark and most of the brighter stars are visible even in daytime. Among them wanders the disc of a large moon shining in a ghostly blue light.

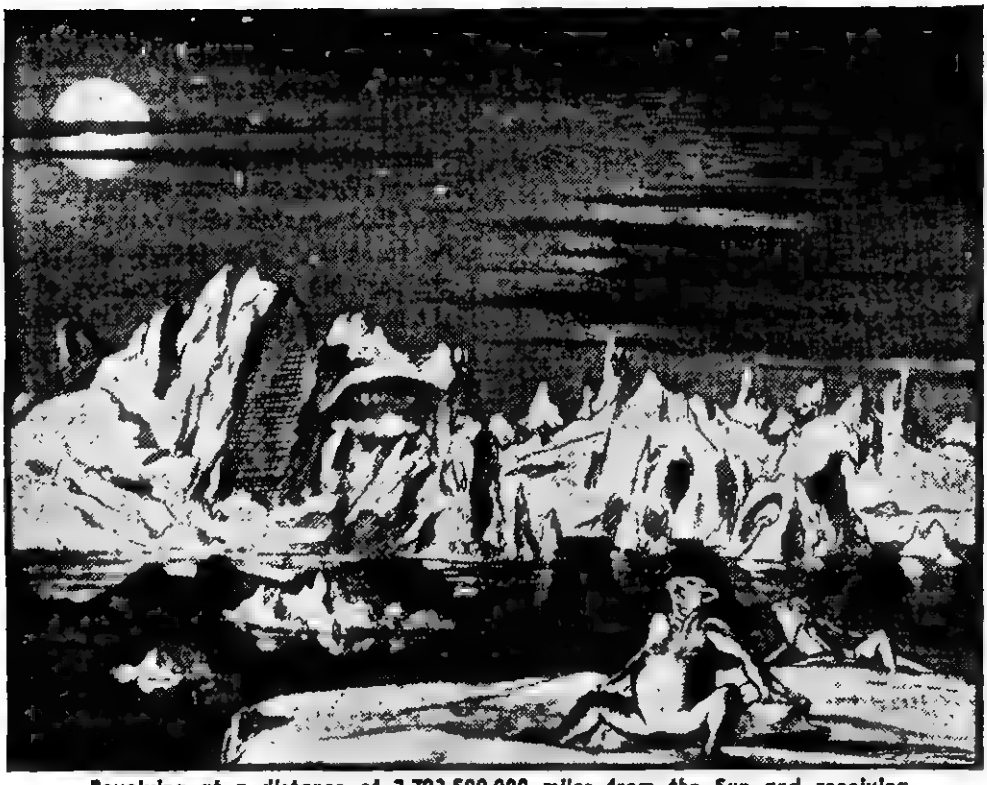
The tide raised by the bluish moon mounts slowly and the pale blue sea is covered with strange little abrupt and short waves. They make little jumps against the greenish hard rocks that seem as eternal as the planet itself. And patches of white powdery snow are gradually submerged by the liquid.

An explorer from one of the inner planets would call this sea liquid air. And he would say that the snow consists of frozen gases. And if the—by comparison—scorching body heat of the explorers could touch the eternal rocks they would melt and then the explorers would call the molten rock by the name of water.

The planet in question is Neptune, discovered on September 23rd, 1846 by Galle in Berlin after Leverrier in Paris had calculated its existence and its orbit from the irregularities in Uranus' orbit that could not be accounted for by the influences of the known planets. J. C. Adams in England had made the same calculation and had arrived at a very similar result but somehow the observers he notified had failed to find the planet. There exists a slight possibility that they did not take the whole business so very seriously. Another planet at a distance of more than 3000 million miles from the sun seemed so incredible.

But it did, and does, exist, its average distance being actually a little less than calculated; "only" 2794 million miles. Neptune is not a fast moving planet and its orbit is of incredible length. No wonder that it needs close to 165 earthly years to complete one full revolution around the sun.

It has one single large moon, for some reason not yet officially named in the annals of astronomy, but usually referred to as Triton, as it is appropriate for the companion of Neptune. Triton is brighter when photographed than it is when seen directly in the



Revolving at a distance of 2,793,500,000 miles from the Sun and receiving only 1/1000th of the heat received by Earth, Neptune is a frigid super-Antarctica, with a temperature of only 100 degrees centigrade above absolute zero. Ice in such a world would be eternal rock, carbon-dioxide and methane will be snow while the seas consist of liquid air. There is only one large, lonely satellite that sheds dim, bluish, light on a world too cold for activity of any kind.

telescope, which proves that its light is closer to the blue end of the spectrum. The dimensions of that moon are about those of Luna and there exists, of course, the possibility that it is not completely alone with its planet. There might be other smaller moons, just as Jupiter and Saturn have many small moons and only one or four, respectively, large moons. But if there are smaller moons around Neptune we'll hardly be able to discover them, at least not as long as our astronomical observatories are all located on Earth.

NEPTUNE itself is one of the light planets. Its mass is seventeen times that of Earth. But with a diameter of 32,930 miles the density amounts to only 1.3 times the density of water, a tiny fraction less than that of Jupiter. The surface gravitation resulting from mass and diameter is strikingly close to that of Earth. It is 98 per cent of what we call "normal."

The period of Neptune's daily rotation was not known for a long time and some theorists asserted that it should show as strong a tilt as that of Uranus. The rotational axis of Uranus is almost in line with the plane of its orbit so that the sun shines almost vertically on each pole once in an Uranian year of 84 terrestrial years. There existed a theory that this strong tilt is the result of some powerful influence exerted, say by another sun passing close to our solar system when the planets were already in existence.

If some such event were really the

reason for Uranus exceptional behavior, that influence must have done something to Neptune too. In fact Neptune should show this influence still more noticeably, being much farther away from the sun.

As long as the rotation itself was completely unknown — as to whether, how, how long and in what direction — nothing could be said about the axis of rotation. We now know, thanks to the spectroscope, that the "day" on Neptune equals 15 and ¾ of our hours and we also know that the axis does not coincide with the plane of the planet's orbit around the sun. This orbit, incidentally, is remarkably similar to a mathematical circle, only that of Venus shows still a lesser eccentricity. Whatever it was that disturbed Uranus seems to have had no influence on Neptune.

Triton, it is true, revolves in 5 days and 21 hours around its planet in the "wrong" direction which was once taken as proof that at least the moon's orbit had been tilted over completely. But astronomers are now reluctant to attach a clearly defined significance to that fact. Phoebe, one of Saturn's smaller moons, also circles its primary in a direction opposite to all the other nine. And of Jupiter's seven small moons at least three are retrogressive. The moon of Neptune, it must be admitted, is the largest of all the retrogressive bodies in our solar system, but as long as we do not know whether Neptune has other, smaller moons and see how they behave it is better not to draw any conclusions from Neptune's retrogressive satellite. The orbit is exceptional, but it is not unique.

I SOMETIMES wonder whether these large outer planets, Uranus and Neptune, will ever be visited by space ships, except for a solitary expedition to check the actual conditions against the conclusions drawn beforehand from observations. Speaking from a human point of view they seem so utterly useless. There is no reason to visit them for the sake of their seas of liquid and their continents of frozen gases.

Not that we could visit them for some time to come. The theory of space flight says no to the proposition of a flight to Uranus or Neptune. Of course we cannot tell how quickly things are going to develop. At present there is a singular race taking place between rockets and atomic power.

When the theory of space flight was first developed by various scientists just after the World War it was a race of theories. That atomic power existed was already known, that space flight was a possibility was just then proven. And while the science of space flight developed the science of atomic power was left behind.

The rocket enthusiasts, not willing to wait for atomic power, which they regarded as a far fetched dream, based all their calculations on liquefied gases for fuel, finally selecting hydrogen and oxygen with the reservation of substituting ozone for oxygen if it could be handled. Theoretical solutions for the orbits to be traveled—and for their requirements as to fuels, supplies, etc.—were found and published.

Our neighbors in space, Mars and Venus, could be visited, it was found, once actual rocket engineering had progressed as far as the theory held possible. The larger asteroids could be visited, and Mercury and Jupiter reached and circled without landing. And if re-fueling could be accomplished on the moons of Mars, even Saturn could be reached and circled. Uranus and Neptune were still out of range.

While the theory of space flight thus reveled in long equations, the engineering problem was attacked. Liquid gases

could be brought together and ignited without smashing the rocket. And soon liquid fuel rockets made one-mile hops. All the time atomic power remained a dream. But during less than two years atomic power caught up and may gain an advantage even while this is written.

At present the road to atomic power seems clear . . . but anybody who ever did experimental research knows that obstacles have a habit of popping out of the most unexpected corners. It seems to be just a question of more or less lucky accidents for the one or the other side whether the first large scale atomic power plants will hum before the first rocket penetrates beyond the limits of the atmosphere or whether these two events will take place in a reversed order.

AS SOON as *both* events take place, both sciences will go hand in hand. Atomic power will take over in rockets where liquid fuels begin to get too bulky. Then the outer planets will no longer be out of range. But even then there will be no reason to land on them. They offer nothing that cannot be had closer to home, because whatever it is they may have to offer will still be out of reach, buried under hundreds of miles of frozen and liquid gas. What cannot be reached on the planet might be on the surface of the planet's moon. Possible, but then that moon, one of Uranus' four or Triton, will be visited, not the planet.

Pluto, still farther out, will get a visit, as soon as it can be done. Pluto is a small and heavy world, moving in a highly eccentric orbit, curiously reminiscent of an Earth thrown out of its rightful place into the frozen region at the edge of the solar system. Does it possess a moon or several moons? Is it only one of several small planets moving in what we already term interstellar space beyond Neptune, dense and heavy again by the decree of an unknown natural law that operated when the solar system was formed?

Or is it really true that Uranus' axis was tilted and something strange was done to Triton's orbit by an intruding star millions of years ago which in that process lost one of its own dense inner planets which was then forced by our own sun into a haphazard orbit? Or is this orbit, elongated to an extent as only asteroids show it—and, of course, comets—also the result of a battle between two strong gravitational fields?

None of these questions will ever find a definite answer unless samples from various points of its surface have been taken and examined and given birth to a few voluminous reports and discussions. Even that may not be decisive, but it will be worth trying. And that's why Pluto will be visited, as soon as it can be done.

«« THE HORMONE OF YOUTH »»

DR. NEAL E. MILLER, of the Institute of Human Relations, Yale University, has conducted some experiments with very startling results. He asserts that he can make an old man mentally and sexually young again.

Dr. Miller studied his test group after an injection of the hormone, testosterone proprionate, was administered and again after an injection from which the hormone was removed. After the hormone was injected, the men became gayer, several of the older men were rejuvenated, nervousness and emotional instability were decreased. A decided improvement in the condition of men with various types of glandular deficiency was noted. Those with the greatest deficiency showed the greatest improvement. The men showed signs of better muscle tone, renewed energy, and greater stamina than before the injection. On the other hand, there was no psychological improvement in the group of men when the hormone was removed from the injected. Dr. Miller concluded, therefore, that the hormone injection had been the cause of the emotional and sexual improvement noted in his test group.

The VOICE

by WILLIAM P. McGIVERN

Enrico stiffened in stark amazement; there was a voice speaking! It was coming out of the air above their heads!

IT'S a startling thing to find your fake seance room invaded by the real thing—but even worse when the ghost is a liar!

ENRICO ALVIRA was a tall dark young man with soulful brown eyes and the face of an angel. From the top of his be-jeweled turban to the tips of his black felt slippers he was a physical embodiment of the glamour and mystery of the East.

He was lounging comfortably in a silk cushioned chair, smoking a cigarette in a foot-long holder and admiring with complacent satisfaction the exotic luxury of his office, when his secretary entered and bowed low.

His secretary was a brown, inscrutable little man, dressed in severely cut dark clothes and wearing a white turban.

His secretary, Ali, bowed again.

"A woman to see you, *Sahib*."

Enrico blew a cloud of incensed smoke toward the ceiling and closed his eyes wearily.

"Must there always be this demand on my psychic powers?" he murmured.

"The woman is very expensively dressed," Ali said softly. "She wears very interesting jewels. It is not difficult for this poor one to surmise that she is abundantly blessed with those temporal riches for which the Prophet

had such disdain."

Enrico opened his eyes and a fleeting smile touched his face.

"So?" he said idly. "Jewels, eh?"

He stood up and inserted a fresh cigarette in the ivory holder.

"You may tell the woman, Ali, that she is fortunate. I will see her."

"Yes, *Sahib,*" Ali said. He bowed and withdrew.

Enrico straightened his turban carefully, glanced in the mirror to reassure himself that he looked sufficiently grave and inscrutable, then left his office and proceeded to the chamber where he interviewed his clients and held his seances.

The walls of the chamber were covered with heavy red drapes and a soft blue illumination was provided by a small lamp in each corner.

A woman rose to her feet as Enrico entered the room.

"I'm so glad you've decided to help me, Mr. Alvira," she said, almost tremulously. "Many of my friends have told me how greatly you've been able to help them."

Enrico bowed slightly.

"I am happy to be able to use my powers in aiding those in distress," he said quietly. "Perhaps, when you tell me your problem, I shall be able to help you."

"Oh, I feel sure you will," the woman cried.

ENRICO motioned for the woman to resume her seat, then sat down himself. He studied the woman carefully and arrived at a few encouraging conclusions.

She was wealthy, that was evident. And equally important, she had reached the stage of life where gullibility seems to be an automatic reflex. She was in trouble; and judging from her soft features, and from her presence in a spiritualist's parlors, she lacked the character and will to solve her own dilemma. All of these factors were excellent, from Enrico's viewpoint. They made the kill a certainty.

"Please unburden yourself," he said.

The woman leaned forward in her chair and her soft eyes met his beseechingly.

"Don't think me just a silly old woman," she said. "I'm not just looking for a thrill or something like that. I am in trouble and I feel if I could talk to my husband for just a few moments, it would help wonderfully. I've never believed that the living could communicate with the dead; but I'm willing to believe anything now, if only there's a chance of talking with my husband."

"When did your husband pass over?" Enrico asked somberly.

"Four years ago," the woman answered.

Enrico shook his head sadly.

"That is unfortunate," he said.

"Why, what's the matter? Can't you help me?"

The woman almost sobbed the last question.

Enrico held up one hand in gentle remonstrance.

"It is too soon to decide that. But establishing contact with those who have passed over is always a difficult, hazardous undertaking. And the longer the spirit has been absent from his corporeal body and surroundings, naturally, the more difficult is the establishment of contact."

"N—naturally," the woman said slowly.

"Four years is a long time," Enrico said. "The process of establishing communication with your dead husband might be a long and tedious one. We can only try. If we fail, we must try again."

"Can we start today?" the woman asked eagerly.

"Unfortunately, no. There are certain preparations which I must make before we may undertake to communicate with your husband. I must prepare myself for the exacting ordeal by fasting and solitude. When these things are arranged, and I am in the proper psychic mood, we may proceed. However, you may tell me the nature of your trouble now. It is necessary that I know."

Enrico closed his eyes and allowed his features to relax into stolid immobility. He waved a limp hand gracefully.

"Proceed."

"My husband and I married quite young," the woman began. "We did not have any children, and as the years passed we became closer and closer to each other. We were inseparable. Many times I prayed that I would die first. I could not face the prospect of life without him."

THE woman dabbed at her eyes with her handkerchief.

"But he died first," she said tremulously. "It was pneumonia. He was sick only three days. His death left me to face a bleak, bitter loneliness that is worse than anything I could have imagined."

"Dot iss too bad," a guttural voice said sadly.

"What did you say," the woman said, looking in surprise at Enrico.

Enrico sat up straight in his chair and looked about the dim, red-draped room. Who had spoken?

"N—nothing," he said hastily.

"But I heard a voice," the woman persisted.

Enrico's eyes moved automatically and guiltily to the corners of the room where the loudspeakers were concealed.

The loudspeaking system was used during seances in which a "voice" from the "beyond" was necessary. Ali, his secretary, provided the "voice".

But the voice he'd heard a moment ago wasn't the voice of Ali. And the loudspeaking system wasn't connected, now. It was only hooked up when needed.

Enrico felt cold sweat breaking out under the band of his turban. The room suddenly seemed very warm. Had he only imagined that voice with the guttural, German accent? Impossible! The woman had heard it, too.

She was looking at him with bewildered eyes.

"Who was it?" she demanded in a hoarse whisper.

Enrico realized that he must advance some explanation. What kind of a medium would she think him, if he allowed mysterious voices to barge in and out of the discussion?

"It is nothing to be alarmed about," he said, with what he hoped was convincing suavity. "Sometimes there is a sort of spiritual, er, hangover after a seance. There is at times a kind of, er, astral," he fumbled for the word, "echo, that hangs over in the immediate vicinity of its re-materialization."

"Dot sounds cwazy!" the voice that spoke the words seemed to emanate from the very air of the room. The guttural German voice was very disgusted, if its tone was any indication.

The woman looked fearfully at Enrico.

"I'm afraid," she whispered.

Enrico was, too, but he couldn't admit it. He clasped his hands together to hide their trembling, and attempted a weak smile.

"It is nothing," he said feebly. "Just a trick of the imagination."

The woman stood up slowly, a wondering expression illuminating her face.

"That voice," she whispered. "It was from the—the other side, wasn't it?"

"Dot's right," the guttural voice answered.

The woman stood straight, her hands clenched at her sides. Her eyes moved pleadingly, desperately, about the room.

"Can you help me?" she said in a low tense voice that was but a whisper. "Do you know my husband, John Reynolds?"

"Dot's hard to say. Dere is such a lot of peepul here."

ENRICO slumped back in his chair and clasped his hands to his forehead. *He was going mad!* Or it was a trick!

He sprang from his chair and dashed from the room. He heard the woman call after him, but he didn't stop. He hurried to the basement and jerked open the door of the room where the microphone was set up.

The room was empty! The microphone was not even plugged into its socket. Enrico felt a black moment of horror. This meant that the voice he had heard in the room above was not the effect of some mechanical device; it was no trick; it actually emanated from—

Enrico felt his mind reeling. In all the years he posed as a spiritualist, he had never seriously believed in any sort of after-life. But here was indisputable evidence that the phenomena which he had publicly exploited and privately derided did actually exist.

Trembling and shaken, he returned to the chamber where he had left the woman, drawn by a strange compulsion he could not name.

She was still standing in the center of the room, almost transfigured with the hope and feeling that blazed in her eyes and face.

"Please, please," she implored, "you must help me. My husband was a tall man, with gray hair. Maybe you know of him. Please, you must help."

Enrico realized that she was not speaking to him, but rather to the "voice." The knowledge gave him a strange chill. He looked behind him nervously and swept the gloomy corners of the room with apprehensive eyes.

"Please," the woman whispered.

"It's a big chob," the voice said, and there was a dubious, worried tone in the guttural accents. "Dere are so many here. Und I only know the big shots. Napoleon, Alexander the Great —Alex, I call him—Genghis Khan, Voodrow Vilson; men like dot; big shots."

Enrico glared about the deep gloom of the chamber.

"This is some kind of a joke," he cried. "One of my competitors must have installed a loudspeaker in here to make me look ridiculous. It's a put-up job."

The woman turned to him and the exaltation and hope had died in her eyes. She regarded him levelly and coolly.

"I made a mistake to come here," she said quietly. "It was foolish of me. I don't quite know what I expected, but I did not anticipate being made the butt of a cheap, contemptible joke."

She walked quickly from the chamber.

"Vait," the guttural voice cried. "I vas not making jokes."

"Oh shut up!" Enrico cried in desperation. "You've ruined everything, you fake. That woman will tell others. This might ruin my business."

HE rushed from the room after the woman, but when he reached the street she had disappeared. Returning,

he met Ali, his secretary.

"What is the matter, *sahib?*" Ali inquired, with a discreet bow.

"Come with me," Enrico ordered crisply, and strode back to the red-draped chamber. "Somebody has installed a loudspeaker in here," he said, glaring angrily about. "One of my competitors, probably. We can't interview any more clients in here until that speaker is found and destroyed."

Ali was looking at him bewilderedly.

"But how could there be a speaker, *sahib?*" he asked. "No one has been in here today or yesterday. If someone attempted to install a loudspeaker here, I would know of it."

"I don't want arguments," Enrico almost screamed. "I want that loudspeaker. You find it. It's got a German accent."

Ali shrugged and looked furtively at his employer. "Yes, *sahib,*" he said quietly.

But half an hour later, after all the draperies had been torn down, when all the walls had been examined, when the floor and ceiling had been minutely inspected, there was no evidence of any mechanical speaking system, other than the establishment's own apparatus.

"I tell you, there must be a loudspeaker somewhere in this room," Enrico said, clenching and unclenching his fists spasmodically.

"Vat makes you so sure?"

It was the voice again. The same guttural, German voice, traceless and all-pervading, seeming to materialize in the atmosphere of the room.

"Ali!" Enrico demanded tensely. "Did you hear that?"

Ali glanced about the room, his eyes rolling.

"I am afraid I did, *sahib,*" he said weakly. "You will excuse me, please." He left the room hurriedly, his face white. Enrico never saw him again.

"Vy are you so skeptical?" the heavy voice asked plaintively.

Enrico stared about the room, listening to the last echo of that thick voice.

"You — you are from — from over There?" he said in a whisper.

"Uf course," the voice said impatiently. "I haff been for years and years. I vanted somevon to talk mit so I broke all the rules to come here and talk mit you. Dot is always the trouble; nobody believes me. . . ."

"I — I believe you," said Enrico weakly.

He sat down in a chair and lighted a cigarette with a trembling hand. His mind was confused and distraught; it refused to function properly. But after a moment, his opportunist tendencies rallied to his aid, and brought a semblance of order to his thoughts.

If he were actually and really in contact with a being from the Beyond, there *must* be some way to take material advantage of the situation. Finally an idea occurred to him.

"DO YOU know anything of the affairs of living men?" he asked.

"Vy, naturally. I know all about dem," the voice answered.

"Can you see the future course of human events?" Enrico persisted. "For instance, can you tell what the stock market is going to do, how the war is going to turn, which horse will win the derby, things like those?"

"Vy, of course," the voice said. There was an expansive, patronizing tone to the voice, now. "Anything you vant to know, I can tell you. Ven I vas alive I vas one of the great philosophers of the world. Kant and Hegel stole all of dair vorks from mine. Now zat I am over here in the After-Life, everyzing iss crystal clear. Und I vas right about my predictions uff what it would be like here. Vat iss it you vant to know?"

Enrico straightened in his chair and a fever of hope and anticipation rushed through his veins. With this source of foresight at his command, to what heights could he not aspire? The potentiality that lay within his grasp was enough to stun the mind. Sure knowledge of the outcome of sporting events, political elections, wars, stocks — it was staggering to contemplate the power and wealth that such foresight would bring to him.

"The National derby is being run tomorrow," he said, and his voice was hoarse with excitement. "Could you tell me the winner?"

"Vy, sure, if dot iss vat you vant to know. First, let me tell you a story. Ven I vas alive I had the fastest horse in the whole country. Von day vile riding on the countryside a storm came up. Vind and rain and lighting. Vun big bolt broke over my head, und I saw dot it vas coming for me direct. Joost in time I yell 'Giddap!' und avay ve go ahead of the lightning bolt. For fife miles ve raced, und finally ve left the lighting bolt behind us. Dot vas von fast horse, let me tell you."

Enrico was hardly listening.

"But what about the Derby?" he demanded. "Nimble Heels is the favorite at five to one. The only horse in the race that hasn't got a chance is Bucephalus, at eighty to one."

"Bucephalus!" cried the voice excitedly. "Dot's the horse who vill vin."

"Bucephalus?" echoed Enrico incredulously.

"Dot's right. I knew hiss grand sire, the mount of the vonderful Alexander the Great. Und let me tell you, the fix iss in."

"So the fix is in," Enrico said softly. A smile hovered around his lips. This was perfect. "Are you sure?" he asked.

"My poy," the voice said, "it iss in the bag." The voice lowered to a confidential whisper. "I vas talking to Alexander, himself, not tventy minutes ago. He let it slip. Bucephalus can't lose."

"And neither can I," Enrico cried. *"Adios!"*

HE LEFT the chamber and hurried to his office, changed his turban for a snap-brim felt hat and left his establishment on the run.

His lawyer was incredulous.

"I don't understand," he said, staring at Enrico as if he had gone mad. "You want all of your holdings, your business, converted into cash by three o'clock this afternoon?"

"That is right," Enrico said. "Everything!"

His lawyer ran a distracted hand through his hair.

"You understand, of course, that you're going to take a serious loss on this transaction?"

Enrico smiled and thought of Bucephalus at eighty to one.

"Never mind that," he said. "Just convert my holdings and business into cash. Regardless of the loss, I must have the cash. Do you understand?"

The lawyer shrugged and reached for the phone.

"I'll get right on it," he said. . . .

AT FIVE that afternoon Enrico entered his bookie's office with thirty five thousand dollars in his wallet. That sum represented the convertible value of everything he had owned in the world. His business, his property, his savings accounts, his cars, everything had been sacrificed to raise the amount.

Whistling cheerfully, he tossed the money on the desk.

"Bucephalus, on the nose!" he said.

The bookie, a small, dour, gray man, looked up from under his green eyeshade, and his normally expressionless

eyes were wide with astonishment.

"Are you sure you know what you're saying, Mr. Alvira?" he queried sharply.

"Perfectly," said Enrico.

The bookie looked gloomily at the money.

"I can't take it all," he said. "I'll handle what I can and wire the rest to Philly, N'yawk, Chicago and Boston. Okay?"

"As long as it's on Bucephalus on the nose," Enrico said, "I don't care how you handle it."

"Okay," the bookie shrugged, "it's your dough. But I'm afraid it ain't goin' to be for long."

He made a notation on his book, handed Enrico a receipt and tossed the money into his drawer.

"Much obliged," Enrico said, and left the office.

The next morning at the hour of the running of the National Derby, Enrico was seated comfortably before his radio, as the excited voice of the announcer broke in with an electric, spine-tingling shout:

"They're off!"

Enrico relaxed comfortably in the luxurious surroundings of his office. No, they weren't his any longer, he realized with a contented sigh, but when this race was over he wouldn't have to worry about offices or work, ever again.

"Nimble Heels is in the lead, Skyrocket and Quicksilver trailing slightly as the pack thunders into the back stretch. . . ."

The announcer's voice was frantic with excitement.

Enrico straightened up in his chair and lit a cigarette.

Where was Bucephalus?

"Nimble Heels is drawing away at the far turn. Skyrocket is running second, three lengths back. The rest of the pack is strung along back stretch."

Enrico stood up and brushed the perspiration from his forehead. He threw his cigarette away.

Where was Bucephalus?

" . . . Into the home stretch now, it's Nimble Heels in the lead and Skyrocket coming up fast, making his bid now. It's still any horse's race. Only one horse is definitely out, having stopped over on the back stretch to nibble leaves from the infield trees. He's walking from tree to tree and his jockey has given up and lighted a cigarette. It's a very amusing sight. I'll get his number . . . yes . . . 17 . . . that, folks, is Bucephalus . . . definitely out. It's Nimble Heels by a nose, folks."

ENRICO collapsed into a chair and clapped his hands to his forehead. He was too stunned to appreciate the enormity of the catastrophe.

Stopping to nibble tree leaves . . . Bucephalus!

Wiped out! All his money, all his holdings, his business, everything riding on a horse that had stopped to nibble tree leaves.

With a wild screech he leaped to his feet and charged from the office into the red-draped chamber.

He stood in the center of the gloomy room, glaring in hysterically helpless rage from corner to corner.

"It's all your fault," he screamed. "You told me Bucephalus was going to win. You fraud! You liar!"

"Didn't he vin?" the voice asked in mild surprise. "Somezing must haff slipped up."

Enrico pressed his hands to his temples, shaking with rage.

"Why did you do this to me?" he cried bitterly. "Why did you tell those lies?"

"Vell," the voice said in embarrassment, "it vas — "

The voice stopped speaking and there

was a dead silence in the room.

"What's the matter?" Enrico demanded.

"Shhhh!" the voice said. "I haff been caught. Zey are coming for me now. Zey haff discovered zat I haff been breaking the rules by talking mit you."

"I wish," Enrico said with shrill anguish, "that they caught you before you ruined my life."

"Zis iss gootbye," the voice said sadly.

Enrico dropped into a chair and covered his head with his arms.

"Get out!" he screamed. "I never want to hear you again. Get out, whoever you are."

"Oh, you don't know who I am?" the voice asked in surprise.

"No, and I don't care," raged Enrico.

"But you must know," the voice continued cheerfully. "Zen you vill know how honored you haff been. I am the great Baron Munchausen!"

"Baron Munchausen!" gasped Enrico.

"Dot is right. Haff you efer heard of the time when I chumped my horse up to a cloud; und just as I was going to chump back I — "

The voice faded away in a strangled gurgle, as if someone had clapped a hand forcibly over the mouth of the speaker.

The room was quiet. Enrico slumped back in the chair and stared sightlessly at the red-draped walls.

Baron Munchausen! The greatest and most prolific liar the world had ever produced.

Enrico thought of his thirty five thousand dollars and the property, business and assets it had represented. All gone now.

He shook his head sadly.

"The fraud!" he muttered bitterly.

» LIFE SPAN «

ALTHOUGH Americans have always pointed with pride to our high standards of living and our greatly increased span of life, there are still two countries where the life span exceeds ours. According to statistics published by the Canadian Bureau of Statistics, a Canadian lad five years of age can expect to live approximately 62⅓ years, and an English boy has 60 years to live, while our American boy can only expect about 59⅓ more years.

There were several other very interesting statistics published also. Only two countries—Holland and Denmark—showed a lower male death rate in the ages between 25 and 45 than that found in Canada.

A tabulation with other nation's death rates among five-year-old boys showed that compared with a Canadian boy, an Italian boy showed a 39 per cent greater chance of dying, a Japanese boy about 169 per cent, and an East Indian boy the highest chance of 637 per cent greater.

The fact that medical science has been able to prevent a great amount of illness among young people as well as successfully cure a great percentage of those cases that do occur, has greatly reduced the mortality of younger ages.

Another rather interesting factor to note is that although the average life span has been greatly increased, the number of people to live a complete century has not increased in the past hundred years.

« WIFE AUCTION »

AMONG the ancient Babylonians, the marriage problem was no problem at all. When the girls had reached the age of marriage prescribed by the Babylonian laws, they journeyed to the marriage mart where the young men of the country were waiting to get their wives.

The auction was a very novel arrangement. The first girls to be auctioned were always the most beautiful ones in the lot and always captured the highest prices. This, however, put the poor young men at a disadvantage since they could not afford to bid for the pretty girls and they had no desire to pay for an ugly bride. And so the wise men of Babylonia decided to remedy the situation. They decided that the money brought in from the sale of the pretty girls should be divided up into dowries for the ugly girls. The worse-looking the girl, the greater her dowry was to be. Thus the young men bid for the pretty girls and were bribed to marry the others.

The fathers could not marry their daughters off in any other manner and once a sale was made the young man must promise marriage to his young lady. However, the law did provide that if both parties were not agreeable to marriage, either the purchase price or dowry must be returned and both young man and lady would wait for the next auction.

All-in-all the auctions worked very well and cut down the rate of old maids and bachelors to a minimum.

AMAZING FACTS

By A. MORRIS

MEN IN WHITE

THIS oft-used expression to describe our doctors can now be used to describe the oil-workers around the Gulf of Mexico near Louisiana and Texas.

When petroleum geologists found huge oil deposits under the water in the Gulf of Mexico, a very serious problem arose—how to build the foundations for the derricks and how to protect the pipe lines from the wearing effects of the water. Engineers found that creosoted, water resistant timbers would do the trick for the derricks and coating the pipes with another water and corrosion resistant would protect the pipes.

However, the workers on both the derricks and the pipe lines were plagued with severe facial burns caused by the treated wood and pipes. To prevent these burns, company doctors prescribed zinc oxide. The men now cover their faces with zinc oxide while at work, so that they look like men from another planet, but the burns and infections have disappeared.

* * *

SPAIN'S PRIDE

ONE of the oldest foundations in Europe is the Spanish University of Valladolid. It has been in existence at least since 1260, and was raised to the rank of university in 1346. With many gifts and privileges from kings and popes alike it flourished greatly until the eighteenth century. It has faculties of law, medicine, natural science, and philosophy and letters. There are about 4,600 students.

* * *

HOW SMOOTH?

MR. J. A. SAMS of the General Electric Works Laboratory perfected an instrument which determines the smoothness of an object. The instrument is extremely sensitive and will show a variation as little as one-millionth of an inch, which is way beyond the capacity of the human eye.

This new invention is very similar in appearances to a phonograph with a recording attachment. The object to be tested is placed on the turntable and the sapphire tipped needle is placed on the object. The revolution of the turntable causes the object to revolve beneath the needle and any surface irregularities will create a mechanical impulse as the needle passes over it. These mechanical impulses are transmitted to an electro-magnetic pickup and changed into electrical impulses. The recording attachment then records all the surface irregularities on a graph.

Many industrial uses can be found for such an instrument such as determining the amount of wear that has taken place on a bearing, a moving part in a motor, a piston, etc. It can also be used to determine the smoothness of any flat object in the same manner.

* * *

SAVING THE WOUNDED

DURING the Spanish civil war, Dr. Perez-Vasquez, physician in charge of the Hospital de Carabineros in Madrid, and his associates produced a new antiseptic which they found more satisfactory than any other known antiseptic. According to Dr. Perez-Vasquez, the antiseptic controls infection with less pain to the wounded soldier and at the same time speeds up the healing process thus cutting down on hospitalization time.

The new antiseptic contains ethyl alcohol, glycerine, thymol, phenol, and camphor. It is used with simple irrigation to replace the clumsy technique and special equipment required by the Carrell-Dakin method.

The formula and method of compounding the antiseptic were published and may prove of great help in saving lives of American soldiers everywhere who may be wounded in battle.

* * *

AURORA BOREALIS IN THE LAB.

THE Aurora Borealis can be reproduced in the laboratory by simply firing a stream of electrons through an inert gas such as neon and curving their luminous train with a magnet. This corresponds to the earth deflecting the streams of electrons that come from the sun causing them to hit the molecules of inert gas found in the upper air to produce the natural Aurora Borealis.

* * *

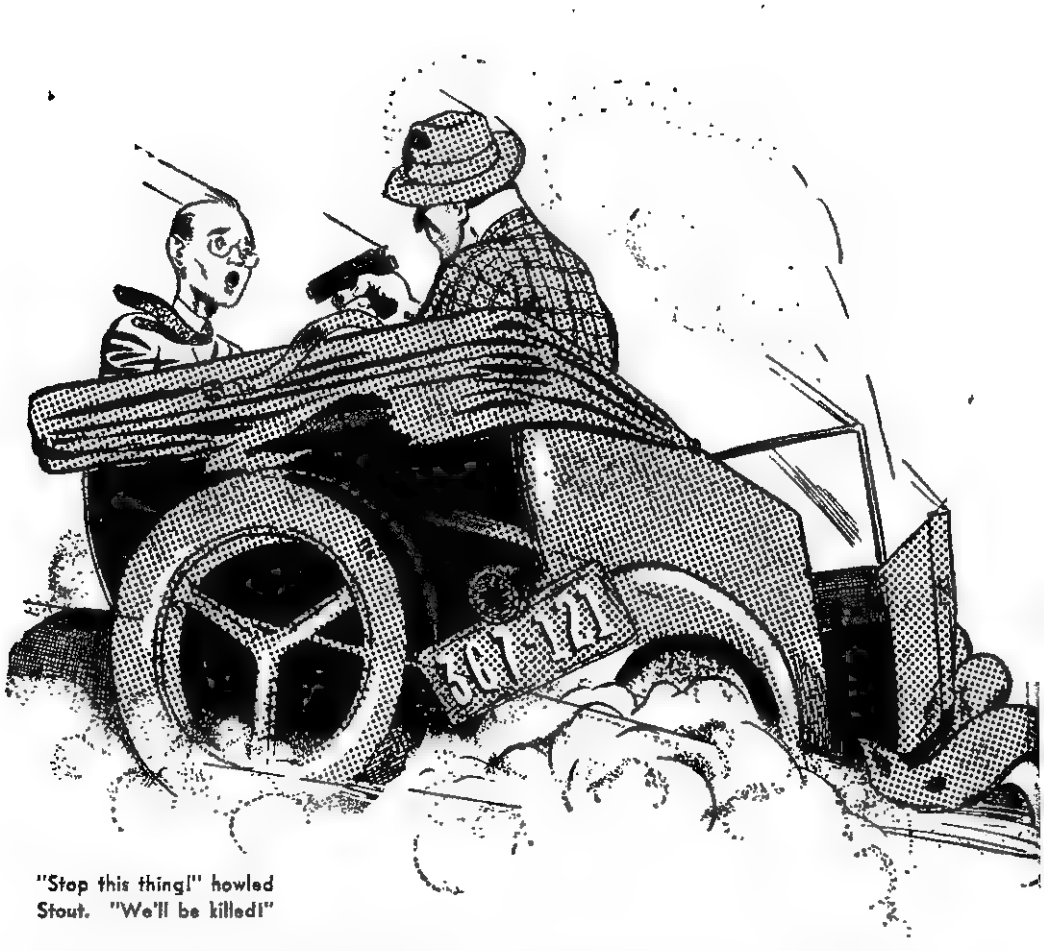
APES VS. HUMANS

THE adolescence period for a human being, or when he grows from childhood to adulthood, takes about ten years; but the ape only spends two years in this stage of growth.

* * *

SHIPPING CITRUS FRUIT

A NEW method of packing citrus fruit will enable its transportation for greater distances than were ever attainable. The citrus fruit is wrapped in paper that has been impregnated with diphenyl, which will not affect the odor, taste, or color of the fruit. This wrapping will protect the fruit during its longer journey.



"Stop this thing!" howled Stout. "We'll be killed!"

OLIVER BRADY was at peace with the world this sun drenched spring morning. The Model A rolled along under him at the sedate, yet interesting speed of thirty-five. It shook Oliver's thin figure around under the wheel a little more than he liked to admit. The highway was still free of traffic as, at a gravel widening, he twisted the wheel slowly and rolled up to the single pump that was Curley Ferris' Gas Palace.

Curley saw him drive in and looked up with small interest at the familiar, overalled figure. Tossing the morning paper to one side, he waited while Oliver climbed out of his car and approached. The screen door squeaked open dryly.

"Morning, Curley!" Oliver spoke slowly, with a precise nod of his head. "I'd like some gas."

Curley shifted his enormous belly around and pulled the heavy-rimmed specs from his nose.

"You know where the pump is," he grunted. "Take what you need. I'm busy."

He was always busy. Behind the fly-specked window a passing motorist was always sure of seeing an empty, dust covered oil can display—two twisted hanging fly papers—and the round, comfortable Curley half-hidden behind his paper. Gasoline was incidental in his life.

Oliver started to back toward the door, stiffened in pride and his Adams-apple bounced.

"You get the gas," he insisted.

OLIVER PERFORMS A MIRACLE

By LEROY YERXA

When Oliver said energy could be changed to matter he didn't expect that he'd be doing it to save his life!

Ferris hesitated as though he couldn't have heard correctly. Then all four of the chair legs dropped with a loud bang and he stood up slowly.

"There's them who can't do a thing for themselves." He groaned. "Well, if you can't—you can't."

He went out the door, letting the screen plop back in Oliver's face. The pump hose came off its hook and clattered against the fender.

"Hey!" Oliver said angrily. "Take it easy there. Can't be buying new fenders every week."

Curley chortled, belly shaking with mirth.

"Since when," he asked, "have you ever bought more than a can of wax for this death trap?"

The smaller man's face turned livid. He straightened a full five-foot-five and his pale blue eyes turned two shades darker.

"I'll thank you to be more careful how you describe my property. There ain't a better car been made than that twenty-nine Model A, and this one gets the best attention a fella' can give it."

THIS was an old story to Curley Ferris. Brady chugged in every Monday morning on his way to town. He always tipped the small, dignified face at the same angle and launched a new battle in defense of the A. He and the old Ford went together in a manner that made Curley's big heart warm when he saw them roll into the drive. Wordlessly he hung the hose back on its hook, turned and wobbled

back toward the small garage.

Hoisting his bulk once more into the chair, he grabbed the paper. It was too late. Oliver was at his side, sentences piling themselves on each other in one rush.

"You billy goated old elephant!" His hands were shaking. "What do you expect of a car that's ten years old? Want me to buy one of them high fallutin' Cadeelacs? Poor man like me can only afford one car. There's a limit to what I can stand."

Curley studied him coolly over the specs.

"Talking about limits," he grunted, "when I see you driving in here winter, summer, and spring in that danged old rattle-trap, I just wonder if they is any limits. That car has sure passed 'em all. It'll take you straight to Heaven —or else to Hell, wherever they finally decide to put you."

"Why—why!" Oliver sputtered like a hot griddle. "The engine under that hood is as clean as the day they put it in."

"I'm clean too," Curley's eyes were twinkling, but his jaw had frozen in mock anger. "But on the road I can't do over three miles an hour."

"If you're saying my car ain't fast!" Oliver's neck was turning a lovely pink. "Well! Maybe not—but she ain't no darn road hog either. She just gets me there and gets me back."

"And shakes you up like a butter churn, doin' it," Curley added.

Oliver's ears twitched violently.

He tried to speak in a rich, deep voice but somehow his anger betrayed him, and a high falsetto resulted.

"I ain't a rich man. You can't get more out of a car than you put in, and that watered gas of yours . . . It is a well recognized law of physics that no mechanical instrument will give up more power than is put into it. That's why perpetual motion machines and stuff like that don't work. It's a wonder to me that my A gets enough energy out of your gas to even shake like a butter churn!"

Oliver was talking fast, airing his scientific knowledge.

"You've got to use energy to produce energy. For instance, if you burn gasoline in a motor, it changes its identity. It becomes energy, not matter. But it doesn't all change, because much of the matter is only changed into other matter—fumes, and so forth. Some of the energy is lost in friction, too.

"Some scientists have said that energy could be changed into matter, to reverse the process. But they haven't found out how to do it yet. Unless maybe *you* know the secret underneath that watered pump of yours . . ."

Curley was in high gear now.

"As far as getting more out than you put in, why don't you run the thing on water altogether? Three gallons of gas a week ain't making me rich."

The argument had progressed beyond Curley's original desire to heckle Oliver. He was relieved that the phone on the far wall started to ring. One long—two short—that was his signal.

"See who it is." He hated like tarnation to get up.

Oliver frowned a little and went across the greasy floor.

Picking up the receiver he said,

"Yep?"

Then his small face turned a shade lighter.

"Who? Thunderation! Yep—Yep! Well I'll be hanged!"

He hung up slowly, turning with a sickish yellow light on his face.

"Well?" Curley demanded. "Don't stand there like a horse with distemper. Who was it?"

"Convicts," Oliver said hollowly. "Two men escaped from state's prison.

They are headed this way."

FOR the first time this morning Curley acted with some pretense of speed. With shirt tail flying from the creaseless pants, he was into the back room like a shot and out again with the shotgun.

"Let 'em come" His puffy face had tightened and grown fierce. "We'll blow 'em to kingdom-come!"

Oliver stood listening. The prison alarm sounded faintly across the farm land. Sirens were already screaming faintly far down the road. He sidled behind Curley's bulk, feeling a little more concealed. He shivered.

"Suppose they might go the other way?" It was an expression of hope.

"Nope—not a chance." The hand around the shotgun tightened. "This is the only good road. They'll try to lose the police in that mess of county roads south of here."

The sirens were closer now, and Curley's gun wavered a little. He'd shot a rabbit once, and had almost cried.

"Look!" His hand clutched Oliver's shoulder. Two men jumped out of the bushes and ran toward Oliver's car.

Oliver started to jump up and down.

"Shoot!" he ordered. "Shoot 'em before they get my car."

The heavy gun came up, hesitated, then dropped again. Perspiration stood out on the fat man's face.

"I can't do it."

They were across the drive already, and climbing into the flivver.

"Don't be scared," Oliver howled. "Let 'em have it."

The Ford coughed, started to idle spasmodically.

"I ain't scared. Just remembered—the shells are all up in the bedroom. It ain't loaded."

Something in Oliver's timid heart snapped. Like a hen protecting its young, he shot toward the door. The screen cowered before the onslaught. With the full power his thin legs could muster he was after the retreating car. Sirens closed in from all directions.

In a low, flat dive he pitched forward into the rear seat. He hit the floor with an unhealthy groan of pain.

"Well—well!" The stoutest one of the pair of convicts turned and looked down at him. "I think it's a man."

There was a painful lump rising on Oliver's thinning scalp and another on the bony left knee. Now that he was in the car, he wondered why he'd ever left Curley. They were on the highway going ahead at a noisy, but fairly fast clip.

The driver looked over his shoulder at the frightened little man in the back seat. He was tall and had a thin, tight lower lip. There was a livid scar across his neck. Stout had pulled a gun from somewhere and held its short barrel aimed at Oliver's head.

"Say Grampa!" Scar Neck asked, "why don't you feed this trap a good tonic?"

OLIVER realized that for the time being he was safe. They were going about forty miles an hour and that was the best the A could do. It was a matter of minutes before the police would be upon them. He became quite brave.

"If you're so darned smart," he suggested," find a tonic yourself. This is as fast as *I* have to drive, not being a law-fearing man."

Instantly he wished he'd remained silent. He gulped and felt very ill as the gun poked forward against his stomach.

"How in Hell *can* we get some speed out of this Kiddy-Kar?" he grated.

Oliver had climbed painfully up onto the seat cushion now.

"You might try putting in a supercharger," he quavered. Then—"No—no—you ain't hardly got the time."

Stout turned on him, the tenseness of his yellow face silencing any further outbreaks. Heavy lips curled up, leaving a row of broken teeth leering at Oliver.

"Shut up, wise guy!" he ordered. "If we go out, you'll be right with us."

Oliver looked at the wavering tommy gun. Stout's thick finger was rippling over the trigger, shaking with fear. The little man realized that Stout meant what he was saying. Oliver wished sincerely that he had taken Reverend Beecher's advice and attended church other than on Easter Sunday—he wished he could erase his past sins—that time twenty years ago when— One of the police cars was close behind now. He could hear its wheels howl in protest at the curve they had just come around. Stout would shoot him before they would have a chance—

You can't get more out of a thing than you put in, he had assured Curley. Now he wished that by some miracle he could. If only something could happen to save his neck.

The gun came forward, Stout's eye leering at him from its further end.

"Do something!" Stout commanded, "or I'm letting 'er tear."

OLIVER'S right eye focused on the dashboard. The gas gauge was bouncing up and down wildly. The eye traveled toward the speedometer, the key—THE KEY—THAT WAS IT. If they turned off the key now, the Ford would backfire like all get out. Perhaps in the excitement—! But they wouldn't be foolish enough to do that. Maybe if he told them to turn it to the left . . . He'd never tried that himself, but—

"The car's got two motors!" Oliver howled. His voice held a desperate eagerness. If they would only believe him. "Turn the key way to the left and the other motor will come on."

Scar Neck looked at Stout. His lips were quivering strangely. The police car was almost up with them now. Men were visible at the windows, rifles poking toward them.

"He's nuts," Stout said in a strained whisper.

Scar Neck shrugged his shoulders. "Maybe not," he said.

He felt for the key with one hand and gave it a violent twist.

Oliver felt his body slam back against the cushion as the flivver took a sudden gulp of gas, shivered from bumper to trunk and leaped forward like a racing car.

Scar Neck's foot fell from the gas pedal, but the car only went faster. Oliver saw the controls whip into reverse.

"Cripes," Scar Neck howled gleefully, "we got a bird on our hands."

Oliver was thunderstruck. He had prescribed the impossible and it was happening. He was getting more out than he had put in, and he didn't think he liked it. Now they had the road to themselves. The last police siren had faded out, and the sounds of the chase were criss-crossing among themselves far behind.

The A flew through Fayetville with everything but wings to push it faster. They collected a stray cat and a chicken enroute, and dove like fury into the open country beyond. Oliver wondered dazedly what the citizens of Fayetville would think now. Who said the A wasn't a Super Car?

WITH the police lost far behind, Scar Neck felt safer.

"Better stop and collect ourselves,"

he announced finally. He pressed the brake pedal and released his foot from the gas. Nothing happened. Nothing, that is, except a marked increase in their speed. He pushed the brake harder. There was a strong burning odor and the brake lining went up in a puff of smoke. The speedometer had long since hit its limit and blown out its own heart. They must be doing over ninety. Oliver wished mightily that he could be back at the Gas Palace.

"We gotta stop this chariot," Scar Neck shouted. They hit a curve on two wheels, straightening out again. His face held a look of horror. The front left fender got tired of holding on and fell behind with a loud rattle of tin.

"Do something!" Stout considered Oliver the miracle man by now. "I got a wife and two kids."

Stout's face was even more yellow than before, but the teeth had retired between the tight, anxious lips. He waved the gun again, and Oliver wondered if it was worth all this trouble. He had no idea what to do next. Another fender left for parts unknown, followed by a very important sounding gadget, somewhere below them.

"I—I can't stop it," he wailed. The wind shrieking into his face, cut short any further explanation. The top had ballooned up from the flivver and settled in a ditch fifty feet behind. Telephone poles were rushing past like an animated picket fence. A lone farmer, watching them from the road side, almost twisted his neck loose in an attempt to follow the flying flivver's trail.

Stout had the gun aimed at Oliver's neck again, but the little man rather welcomed the idea of getting shot. *Anything* else would be welcome right now!

They were skimming the concrete now, and Scar Neck seemed to exercise all he had to keep them out of the air. The motor roared in protest. Wind howled over the open-topped car until it sounded like a diving Spitfire.

Stout lost his nerve. His tear-steeped eyes swept over Oliver pleadingly.

"We don't mean you no harm. Sure—we're from the pen, but we ain't really bad boys."

Oliver took courage. His brain turned over slowly. He had bought only three gallons of gas. It would run out in a minute and they would have to stop. Why not let them go on thinking he was the brains of the outfit?

"Shoot some holes in the gasoline tank."

He ordered Stout to do it, in as superior manner as he could, controlling the urge his voice had to break on the high notes.

STOUT bestowed a thankful, tear-stained glance upon him. He picked up the gun, aimed at the fuel tank up under the dashboard and cut loose.

"Rat-tat-tat-tat—"

Somewhere behind, the last fender hit the road and bounced away into the ditch. Gasoline trickled slowly out of the holes in the tank. Then something happened that added to the already perplexed trio's worries. Gas continued to spurt from the tank. It flowed freely, splashing out over the men in the front seat. Finally it came out like a streaming fire hose, gallons and gallons of it spouting over the car and flying into the road behind. The Model A had gone completely off the beam.

Three gallons of gas left a half hour ago. Now it was flooding them with more fuel than three tankers could carry. Oliver bowed his head, waiting

for the end. And while he waited, he thought.

Somehow, the turning of that key to a position he'd never tried, simply because it had never occurred to him, had performed the scientific miracle he'd mentioned to Curley—had reversed the normal processes of energy and matter. Here was the A changing energy, perhaps free energy from the air, back into matter! The car was making gasoline by the gallon! And the net result was that the cylinders still churned furiously, from energy surging through them to become matter, driving the car as though the normal processes of physics were still going on.

Something wrenched out from under his feet, the floor boards dropped down and he was counting checker-board slabs of concrete flashing under him. He yearned to drop through the hole and disappear forever. Stout was on his knees, bending over the seat back in a position of prayer.

"Please save us," he begged. "We'll give you all the stuff we stole."

A car loomed up far ahead. It was cruising along in the same direction as they, at a sedate speed. The road narrowed in between two high rocky walls. It was getting dark. Everything had fallen out of the flivver but the motor.

Thoroughly cowed, Stout had curled into a miserable ball to escape the spurting gas that still belched from the bullet-torn tank. Scar Neck leaned against the wheel, eyes bugging at the car ahead. If he tried to swerve around at this speed, they'd roll over into the rocks and slice apart like soft butter.

AN IDEA turned over slowly in Oliver's mind. It hesitated—caught against a brain cell—and lodged firmly there. He mustered the remaining strength in his frail arms and pulled himself upright. The idea was so simple that he felt like crying. He shouted over the howl of the wind into Scar's ear.

"Turn off the key."

Scar's body snapped forward. One hand crept toward the dash, touched the key and turned it around. His face was shining with gratitude.

The flivver coughed like a dying dinosaur—leaned forward on its front wheels—and backfired like an eight-inch gun. *But it started to lose speed.*

The other car was too close to avoid a collision. The rear end of it seemed to push back. It sat down on them abruptly and refused to get up. Oliver saw Stout flying over the back of the seat . . .

Centuries later he regained consciousness. It was very dark. His head had popped through something that felt like a square of cardboard. The "something" was cutting his neck painfully.

He remembered the accident. Good Godfrey! He was still alive, and lying on his back in the deep ditch.

He jerked the horse collar thing from his neck. It scraped his face, and came loose. He saw it was the inner side of a car door. There was a large, white circle painted on the surface and his head had gone straight through the bull's eye.

With bleary eyes, Oliver tried to read the white letters painted around the white circle. His face relaxed and the bewilderment v a n i s h e d. Stout and Scar Face, if they were still alive, would be well taken care of, for a comforting message greeted his eye. STATE POLICE PATROL, it said. The car they'd crashed into had been a police car.

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Scientific

SCIENTISTS DETERMINE TIME OF OCCUPANCY OF CAVES BY **NEANDERTHAL MAN** THROUGH BONES FOUND NEAR HIS; **BONES** OF **BEASTS** THAT SERVED AS HIS **FOOD** . . .

JOE C. JEWELL

THE **NEANDERTHAL MAN** OF **WEIMAR** LIVED AT THE SAME TIME THE ANCIENT **RHINOCEROS** ROAMED EUROPE, BEFORE THE LAST GLACIAL PERIOD.

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Mysteries

HOW OLD IS MANKIND?

By L. TAYLOR HANSEN

Illustrated by Joe Sewell

The mystery of how old mankind really is has been one of the most discussed and least settled questions of our scientists

ABOUT a generation ago science could have answered the question of Man's Age quickly and without too much bickering. Man was an ape-like creature at the start of the ice ages. Neanderthal Man, that early off-shoot from our stem was considered to be the Darwinian "missing link" by some authorities, while others like Prof. King (impressed by his forward-bending frame, and his low brow), concluded the early race of Neanderthal Europeans had died out for lack of brains.

Science now knows that all of these conclusions were wrong. The skulls of a very good modern type have been found under the Mousterian culture-layer (Neanderthal) in both Great Britain and Africa. Furthermore, though Neanderthal Man was no beauty considered by our present standards, one cannot say that he lacked intelligence. The early skull from the Weimar Valley, Germany (found 1914), is now conceded to have the capacity of the average European of today! Nor is this all. The Neanderthal skull of La Chapelle, France, that of a large man, but typical of his race in every way, is now known to have had a brain capacity of 1625 cc. (cubic cent.) or 145 cc. above that of the average modern European White!

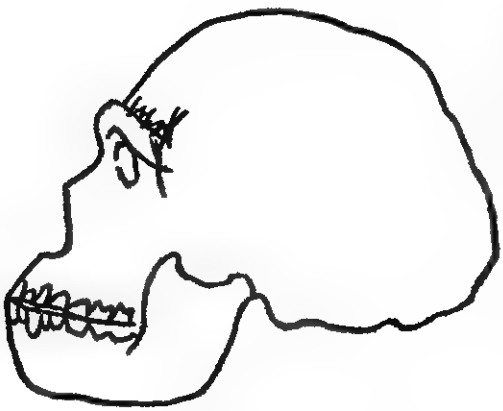
The Weimar skull was contemporary with the Rhinoceros Mercki and the Elephas antiquus (ancient elephant) both of which became extinct in Europe *before* the Würm, or last great glaciation set in. However, though this should place the skull in the first long interglacial, nevertheless, it was found, with the remains of the extinct animals, in a very much petrified and fragmentary condition in the gravel of an interglacial stream. Now, unless we find the body in a burial, we cannot be certain that it belongs to the period of the rock in which it was discovered, because it is possible that the stream washed it from much older strata. Keith points out this possibility when he describes the skull.

And in passing, it may be noted that the same is to be said of all the very early skulls which have been found. Piltdown Man, the Ape-man of Java, Heidelberg Man, Sinanthropus (China), and the London skull, not to mention the ape-like (but more intelligent than modern anthropoids) skull of Taungs Australia, all belong to the list which were found in fragmentary condition in the beds of very ancient streams and which therefore might have come from earlier strata.

Furthermore, other elements, or reconsiderations of earlier observations are pushing back the horizon of mankind. The assignment of more intelligence for the first two types than they were first credited with, and the discovery that wisdom teeth were sometimes as rudimentary in the jaws of prehistoric races as they are in those of modern man, points to a period when the jaw was still more massive than any yet found, though there is no doubt that the modern jaw is in the process of shrinkage.

NOW it is interesting to note that the Neanderthal skull which was imbedded in the ancient interglacial stream of the Weimar Valley showed many characteristics of modern skulls, or rather, let us say showed more similarity to Modern Man than the Neanderthal skull of La Chapelle which such conservative scientists as Keith assign to some two hundred thousand years later, when the race was making the last stand of its millennium-long fight against the big-brained and handsome Cro-Magnon of Neanthropic (modern) skull. Thus we see that the Neanderthal race was in the process of evolving larger brains within the case of its own peculiar type, when Modern Man extinguished the type forever.

Now the question which naturally follows is this—if Keith considers two hundred thousand years a very *short* time for Neanderthal Man to have evolved the difference in the skull types between the Weimar skull and that of La Chapelle, how far back must we go to find the branching type between the creature of Weimar Valley and the straighter face and smaller eye-ridges of Modern Man?

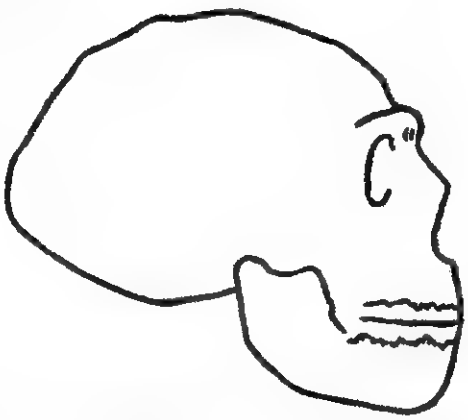


The Weimar Valley Skull. This had been a Neanderthal youth of about nineteen whose skull was shattered by the blow from a sharp instrument.

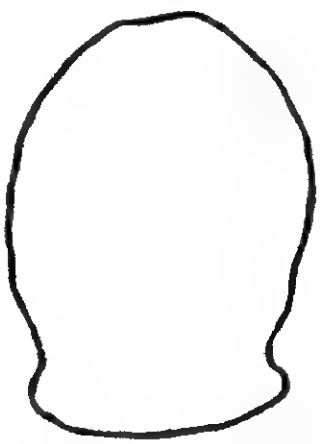
In all this reckoning of time, it must be noted that the anthropologists, confused by the time-clock of the glacial-periods which the geologists continue to debate, use varying cronologies. Keith prefers only two glacials—the first and the last. Geologically he is speaking of the first and the third, which were the heaviest, and prefers to regard the second and fourth as mere fluctuations of climate.

Furthermore, in the caves where the races of ancient man built his fires and buried his dead (Neanderthal Man did both), while he cast aside the bones of the animals he ate and thus dated his own occupancy, why must science accept only the last date before these animals became extinct instead of the time when they were in their prime? The answer is, of course, the excessive conservatism of the trained scientist whose mind always replies: "He could not have lived *later* than the long interglacial" rather than the more obvious: "He probably lived *during* the cooling Pliocene."

How old is mankind? That is a question for which science is still searching the answer. In the last decade, the horizon has been pushed back hundreds of thousands of year. Nor has it brought us a vision of the dawn. Instead it has only brought vistas of still greater antiquity. No wonder that the great anthropologist Keith in reversing some of his famous conclusions of the twenties, makes his often-quoted statement that "Anthropology should be entirely re-written every five years!"



The Neanderthal Skull of La Chapelle whose brain capacity is above that of the average for any group of modern Europeans.



Top view of same showing the peculiarly Neanderthal growth of massive bone ridges over the eyes.

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NEXT MONTH

DID THE AMERICAN INDIAN ONCE INVADE EUROPE?

DISCUSSIONS

AMAZING STORIES will publish in each issue a selection of letters from readers. Everybody is welcome to contribute. Bouquets and brickbats will have an equal chance. Inter-reader correspondence and controversy will be encouraged through this department. Get in with the gang and have your say.

CRITICISM

Sirs:

It's about time you published some criticisms, or doncha' want the people to know what an expert thinks of your pulps?

I've got a pet gripe that I'm going to pick out on youse guys,—in fact I got two pet gripes. As follows:

1. Ya' never publish my letters. How about it, huh?

2. Gooey, gooey, gooey, wonderful, superb,—fooey! All I see in this discussions corner is letters tellin' you guys just how super-super you are. My God! You guys cert'nly love yourselves, doncha?

Well, I think your book stinks!

Some of the short stories were good, some were bad, some were very bad and some were lousy!

But on the whole your new quarterly was just about readable. You've put out some honies, I'll admit. But yez really ruined the last one

How about it, Editor, huh? Let's you and the boys do som'pn' —— and ya' better publish this!

ROBERT RICHEL,
12-13 Ellis Avenue,
Fairlawn, New Jersey.

Okay, Bob, we done it. Now how about another letter?—ED.

AXE TO GRIND

Sirs:

Having a free evening and an axe (or two) to grind, I have, as you may observe, decided to write you, the Most Supreme and Omnipotent Ed. of Good Ol' AMAZING.

Having temporarily assuaged the Editorial Vanity, let us dispose of part of my crushing burden: Would you be so kind as to allot to me a very small portion of "The Correspondence Corner?"

To all these presents, I press forward with the claim (9 years belated) that I once was the Youngest SF Fan. Being of a modest nature, I have not pressed my claim earlier.

You will now be regaled with the tale of my adventures in SF reading -PLEASE, no profanity!

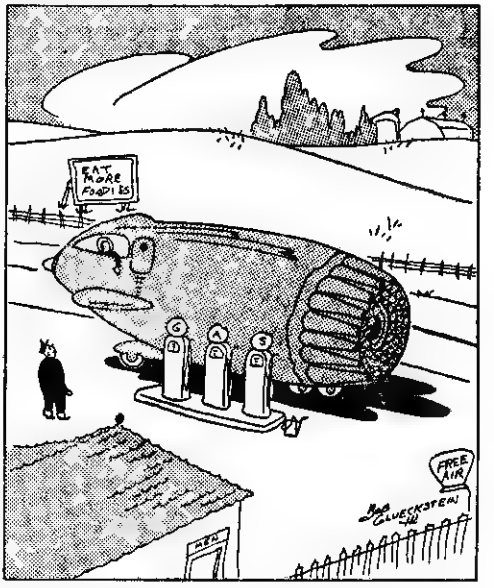
It all began one evening back in December, '33, when pappy brought home a copy of the old AMAZING, which featured a story about some fearsome octopoid monsters on the Moon. Although I was at that time unable to understand many of the words, I managed to wade through the story. That night I had nightmares about the Moon, etc., and was firmly sold on SF. At this point I had better explain that at the moment (10:32¼ P.M., Eastern War Time) I am a young squirt—oops, *gentleman*—of some seventeen summers. Anyway, from that time ('33) on I read all the SF I could get my 'ittle hands on By and by my vocabulary became larger, and I was better able to comprehend the stories that I read. At an age when my contemporaries were reading Grimm's Fairy Tales, I was familiar with the writings of Smith, Jameson, Coblentz, Weinbaum, and the Binders.

What I consider to be my luckiest break came in '34, at which auspicious time I was on deck to read Weinbaum's first Tweel story. The character that I liked best in his works, though, was van Manderpootz, of "The Worlds of If" fame.

Well, do I get the palm (by that I don't mean the flat of the hand across my face) for once being the youngest reader? If I don't, I'll have Willy Ley get after you with some of Terry Bull's weapons.

KEITH BUCHANAN,
Box 148,
Amsterdam, Ohio.

Did you see your request in the Corner? Hope it brought results. ED.



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FROM A TO D

Sirs:

I am an ardent reader of AMAZING STORIES Mag. I read it from cover to cover every time I get my hands on a copy of it. How about putting three staples instead of two in your mag. Give us more front covers by McCauley (will yuh-please) I list the stories and illustrations as they come in your mag. "A" Excellent, "B" Good, "C" Fair, "D" Lousy.

1. "The Vengeance of Martin Brand" by G. H. Irwin gets an "A". The illustration by McCauley merits an "A" too.

2. "The Case of Jonathan Lane" by Cabot gets a low "C". Milburn gets a "C" on his pic, but why all the dark and dismal background.

3. "The Sheriff of Thorium Gulch" by Breuer is stuck with a "D". Breuer should be more modernistic in his stories and why in the name of heaven does he have his hero of 2142 riding over hills and down valleys like a cowboy of the old west? Ye-Gads doesn't Jackson ever draw his pics. according to the story. "C".

4. "Death Rides at Night" by Leroy Yerxa merits a "B" for introducing something new. N. Hadley gets a "B" for his swell work.

5. "The Last Hours" by John Russell Fearn easily gets a "C" but no more. Fuqua earns a "B" for his swell illustration.

6. "The Secret of the Earth Star" by Henry Kuttner gets an "A" for the suspense in the story. I don't know who drew the pic. but it was plenty good, "B".

7. "Into The Caves of Mars" by Festus Pragnell, "C". R. Fuqua gets a "C".

8. "Venus Slave Smugglers" by Jep Powell gets a "C". The illustration gets a "C" too.

9. "Moon Madness" by Richard O. Lewis. Malcolm Smith's illustration merits a "C".

10. "Horsesense Hank in the Parallel Worlds" by Nelson S. Bond merits an "A" any old day.

The illustration gets an "A" by all means. Settles did a swell job on the back cover.

JAMES R. QUARLES,
Rogers Quarles Company,
Gainesboro, Tenn.

A RETIRED PROOFREADER

Sirs.

I read your sorrowful soliloquy in the July issue and resolved to reply to it, herewith.

I really thank the Ziff-Davis Company for the publication of Popular Photography. That field long needed a real magazine for amateurs, not a highbrow art monthly, without much of value to anyone but the upper classes. But I feel it incumbent on me to cordially thank the firm for producing the last issue of AMAZING STORIES, *Fantastic Adventures* and that big *Detective* magazine. It was a happy inspiration to increase the number of pages and the price, for readers will not hesitate to pay more if the book is filled with such interesting stuff as you put out. Now for the brickbats.

I am a retired proofreader of 73 years of age. I read in many of the largest offices in the East

and in almost all of those of Chicago. Mail-order catalogs, medical monthlies, encyclopedias, novels, commercial products, and even Sweet's Architectural Index—the hardest of all the publications for a proofreader. At one time I was listed as one of the six fastest readers in Chicago.

Now I read simply for pleasure. I have found few who could keep up with my speed of reading silently and I often read an 800-page novel in an evening. While I rave through the books I still invariably note any errors or "Bulls" made by either the author or the proofreader who handled the final reading. If I can see the errors while racing over the pages of a publication, absorbed in the story, why cannot a good proofreader do the same? Yet I find many such mistakes and bulls in a number of magazines.

I enclose a list of errors I found in the issue of AMAZING STORIES for July.

But I still will read the magazines that your firm issues, with pleasure and regret at the mistakes—if any in future. I used to know almost all the readers in Chicago and found most of them were conscientious and careful, but there were a few whom I call "Smart Alecks" who were infallible. Until hard knocks chastened me I was one of them.

GEORGE PARKE,
Zephyrhills, Fla.

We do all our own proofreading, and sometimes we get so interested in the story we slip up on the errors. We hope our readers do the same!—ED.

TERRIFIC ISSUE

Sirs:

Before me, lying on the table is a copy of AMAZING STORIES. I can only say that during the five years that I've read your magazine, I have not seen such a terrific issue before.

COVERS—Front = Superb! This cover not only gives you an impression of streamlined beauty, but it modernizes the outlook of the whole mag. Malcolm Smith is good. Keep him!

Back = Fair. Compared to the streamlined beauty on the front, this doesn't give a deep impression.

STORIES—Average = 1—The Avengers = Excellent. Mr. McGivern not only writes humorous stories, but also a novel with a powerful thought. Sequel *please!*

2—They Forgot To "Remember Pearl Harbor" = Perfect.

3—Gods Of The Jungle = Excellent. The reason why I rated it 3, is because it isn't finished. The story is moving. And how! If you have serials on this order, put them in by all means.

4—Sergeant Shane = Good.

5—Juggernaut Jones, Trucker, The Man Who

TRANSFORMATION—*the Magic of India!*

Lovely and lithe was the girl who came riding out of the jungle on the back of the leopard. Gathering her wounded companion she faded back into the sultry jungles, leaving one hunter overawed—and the other deeply in love. To Broadway and back again to India traveled the mysterious trio, the girl and her two leopards. Could the leopards be humans in changed form? Could they again walk the Earth as normal, beautiful girls?... You'll thrill to the exciting fantasy, "The Leopard Girl," by Don Wilcox, one of many stirring stories in the

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Was Two Men, and Henry Horn's Blizt Bomb = Excellent.

6—Captain Stinky = Good.

7—Voice From the Void, and Scientist Disowned = Fair. As for the other two, they were definitely = Ppheww.

FEATURES—Average = Delightful. The Observatory of course, is head and shoulders above all. The article is educational and very interesting. The other features are fair in a sense.

Strange Facts = Amazing. Please continue this by all means. You'll be surprised to know that that is what made a friend of mine become interested in your magazine and later buy it.

Discussions = *Not So Good!* What happened to the answers of YE GOODE ED?

COMMENTS—Didn't like those pictures scattered all over "The Avengers." Didn't like Fuqua's illustration for Gods of The Jungle. He can do better than that. I liked Ned Hadley's illustrations. I must give credit for your artists. They read their stories!

IRRITATIONS—Say, what's this all about trimmed edges? I thought that subject was over with. Dead and buried! I say the heck with it!

SUMMARY this is the best issue so far, and I think for this year; unless the old Ed. has a trick up his sleeve.

AMAZING is amazing, for it made me finish it in one day.

BERJ IGNATIUS,
240 Wadsworth Ave.,
New York, N. Y.

According to the artist, the Martian in question lost his ear in a fight with a Martian Gleep. We ask you, what can we do with a guy like that!—ED.

LIKED MAY ISSUE

Sirs:

Your May issue was excellent and the art work seems to be improving, but what is happening to the size of the Discussion section? With more pages in AMAZING STORIES, it seems there should be an even bigger section where the readers can express their opinions.

The new AMAZING STORY QUARTERLY is swell. Are back issues of the Quarterly for sale?

As to the art in the May issue—the cover is SUPERB, positively the best AMAZING STORIES has had within the last six months. Just one objection, why oh why must the villains all be deformed creatures with some peculiarity such as the green skin on Grael? How about a nice normal villain who isn't a crazed small genius or a huge muscle man or an unscrupulous employer?

We want more McCauley, Krupa, Magarian, and less Fuqua. In the stories more Burrough, by all means, and more stories by Binder, Asimov, and Coblentz. What is the chance of a story by Sam Moskowitz in a future edition of AMAZING? All the stories were fine except Twenty-Four Terrible Hours. Why was this let into the magazine? Hoping for more Burroughs, Discussions, and McCauley.

WOODY W. RUNYAN,
1255 Mulvane Ave.,
Topeka, Kansas.

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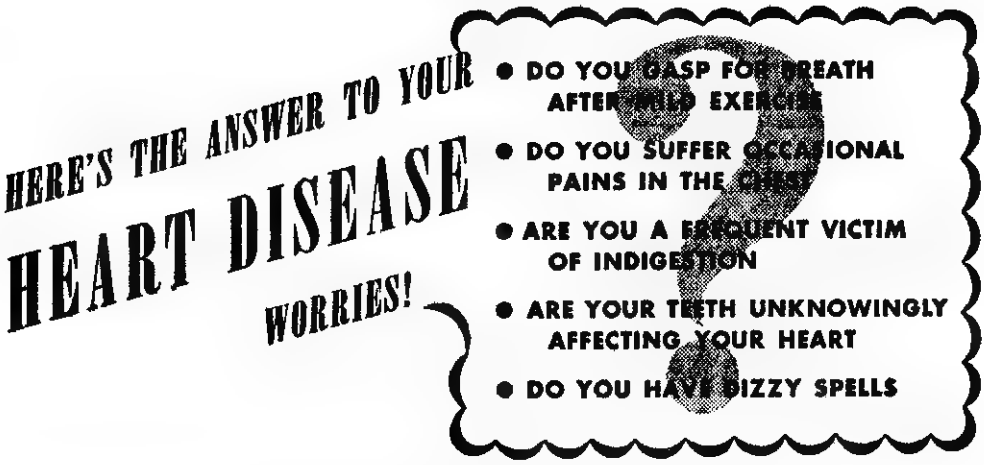
AMAZING STORIES

ON SALE AT ALL NEWSSTANDS SEPTEMBER 10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• ARE YOUR TEETH UNKNOWINGLY AFFECTING YOUR HEART
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PAGE MR. IRWIN!

Sirs:

I am writing mainly to compliment you on the best story ever printed in a science fiction magazine. It happens to be "The Vengeance of Martin Brand."

As the best all-around author, I pick William P. McGivern.

I like interplanetary and time travel stories.

Here are my ratings on your August issue:

1. The Vengeance of Martin Brand—best story ever!
2. Secret of the Earth Star—very good.
3. Death Rides at Night—best novelet in a long time.
4. Into the Caves of Mars—one of Pragnell's best.
5. The Sheriff of Thorium Gulch—I've read better.
6. Horsesense Hank in the Parallel Worlds—worst of the Horsesense Hank series.
7. The Case of Jonathan Lane—Cabot's slipping.
8. Moon Madness—rather boring.
9. The Last Hours—a stinkeroo.
10. Venusian Slave Smugglers—terrible!

Your feature section is superb.

HOWARD JONES,
416 White Bear Ave.,
White Bear Lake, Minn.

We seem to be having success in drawing new writers into the fold. Perhaps that is due to the fact we are picking them out of other fields with rather searching fingers, removing only the cream of the crop. And Mr. Irwin is one of our new writers (persuaded to enter this field) who's been writing 'em for years in adventure fields. We're glad he clicked with his first effort for us.—ED.

JUST TO LOWER OUR EGO . . .

Sirs:

I have just finished reading the September issue of AS and I wish to say it is about the worst publication you have put out in a long time (if possible). The best story was "The Vengeance of Martin Brand," second part of a serial, and even that was nothing to brag about.

"The Love Song of Lancelot Biggs" was crummy, stinky and corny. You should make Bond swallow some of his own seeds.

"Blitz Against Japan" by Williams was a good repetition of a horrid nightmare.

The rest of the stories were dull, very unamazing, and stupid. Here's hoping that the October issue is a lot better. An awful lot.

The latest FANTASTIC ADVENTURES was colossal, superb, and goooood. Very good.

ANGUS MCPHERSON,
719 St. Johns Pl.,
Brooklyn, N. Y.

Come now, Angus, don't be so Scotch with your praise. There must be a "wee bit o' bonnie i' the book!" An' Angus, laddie, maybe it'd be a better thing if Bond would plant his seeds i' the grround an raise himself a crop to eat. It would be th' thrrrifty thing!—ED.

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WHERE IS ADAM LINK?

Sirs:

After finishing the September issue of AS I rate the stories as folows:

1. The Vengeance of Martin Brand—Irwin.
2. Peace Mission to Planetoid X—Swain.
3. Blitz Against Japan—Williams.
4. Love Song of Lancelot Biggs—Bond.
5. Convoy in Space—McGivern.
6. Captain Stinky's Luck—Vance.
7. Robotcycle for Two—Overton.
8. Giants Beyond Pluto—Jarvis.
9. Vengeance on Venus—Costello.

McCauley's pic for the Irwin story was a peach. The only other good pics inside the book were by Fuqua and Milburn. The covers were swell. Settles is good.

How about a 100-page novel by Wilcox or Wellman? You've got room enough. A Little People story in FA wouldn't HURT the mag and where is Adam Link? How about these stories, Mr. Binder?

Could you please tell me how long it takes Pluto to make a revolution around the sun.

JULIUS KOREIN,
8701 Shore Road,
Brooklyn, N. Y.

Pluto makes the circuit around the sun once every 3200 years. How about the Wilcox novel in this issue? It's a pretty long one. And Binder is with us next month with one that will *run 100 pages. As for Adam Link—well, Binder, how about it? Do we get one soon?*—ED.

AT LAST! SUCCESS!

Sirs:

I thought you might be interested to know that a survey taken among members of my organization, Alabama Science-Fantasy League, shows that AMAZING and FANTASTIC have moved from 3rd and 4th places in SF magazines, respectively, to 1st and 2nd; FA first, and AS second. (The back covers on FA helped put it into the lead.)

BEN LUNA, JR.,
401 E. Mobile Street,
Florence, Alabama.

Perhaps the greatest battle of the centuries has been the feud waged between the various fan organizations as to whether or not something below last place ought to be devised to accommodate AS and FA. Now, after five years, we are staggered to find that almost all of them have agreed—that we are actually first and second. Now we are encouraged to really try to make them invent a place above first, to accommodate us!—ED.

A STEAL?

Sirs:

Ordinarily your magazine is tops with me, but the story "Secret of the Earth Star" was definitely a "steal" from "Beau Geste," by Sir Percival Wren. I believe this book was written over forty years ago.

(Continued on page 237)

HOMICIDE CALL

That stiff, cold body on the floor had been a healthy, beloved member of the Gorham household only a few hours ago. I studied the family circle, the ravishing sister, the clean-cut respected brother, the handsome artist, the sniveling ex-servant. "Every one of your stories is a bald-faced lie," I said. Too many clues! And then, as the mystery began to clear, death struck again! . . . There's tense, high-pitched excitement in George Armin Shaftel's HOMICIDE CALL which starts on page 21.

Plus 20 OTHER THRILLING STORIES AND FEATURES—*Including:*

★ **HOT SKINS by Robert Leslie Bellem**—A bullet in the brain of his best friend sent Eddie Maddern on a man-hunt, pitting him against the world's most dangerous mob of fire thieves. How was he to know he'd fall in love with the sister of a gangster? Page 43.

★ **THROUGH THE WALL by G. T. Fleming-Roberts**—Thin walls of the rickety old boarding house let sounds through—sounds of murder so subtle and insidious that even the policeman was fooled. But not Mary Russell. So, naturally, she was slated as the next victim!

★ **ONE BORDER NIGHT by Harold Channing Wire**—"Things happen fast on the border; death crowds life so closely." Gold smuggled across the border was one thing, but to Clint Tyler, the biggest mistake the crooks made was to kidnap Mary Allen. A novelet starting on page 60.

★ **PRIVATE SLEUTHS AT YOUR COMMAND by John York Cabot**—Of Hargrave Secret Service Agency and the true story, unmatched by fiction, of how these keen detectives work for the good of the public. Quietly, unassumingly, they play a major role in the public's protection.

★ **KEEP YOUR EYE ON IT by Howard Browne**—Meek little Wilbur Peddle didn't want to bother anyone. He just wanted to find the man who owed his company money. If the man had an annoying habit of murdering people, though, well, Wilbur would see him brought to justice.

★ **THROUGH MURDER'S EYES by Dwight V. Swain**—The bank robbery had taken place long ago, but pink-faced, moustachioed Colonel Rigsby managed to get in on the final killing! You'll gasp at the thrills this new type of western mystery brings. It starts on page 116.

★ **DEATH LAYS THE ODDS by William P. McGivern**—That carnival in the little Indiana town seemed a strange place for Jeff O'Neil to meet Nick Arcati of the many shady enterprises. "Unpleasant things have a way of happening," Arcati said. They did. See page 140.

★ **ENEMY AGENT by Wyndham Martyn**—A letter from a dead man! Into battle with a desperate, canny blackmailer the letter hurled Anthony Trent, for he owed a debt of honor to the corpse. Sinister menace stalks the pages of this memorable book-length novel.

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September Issue

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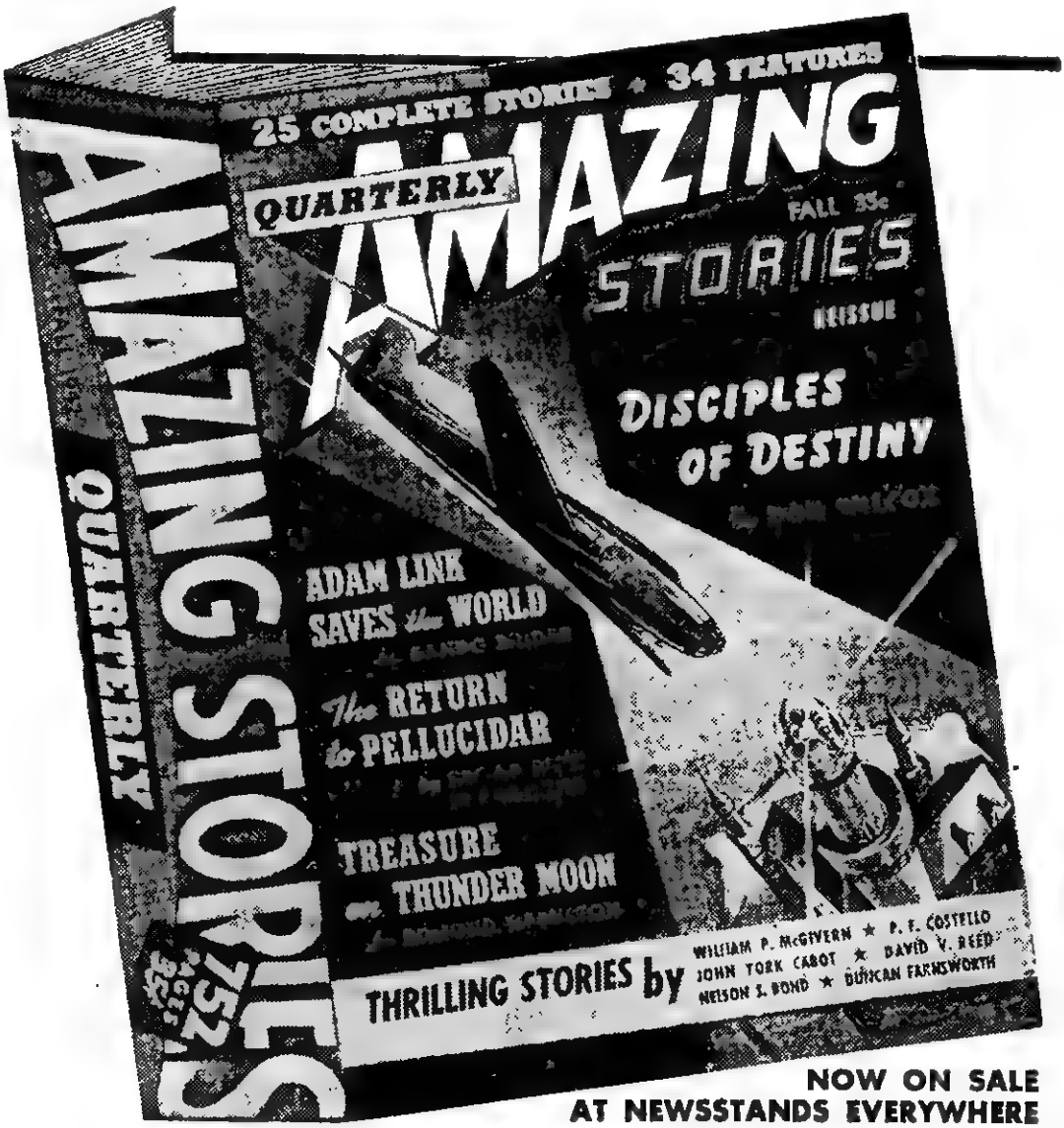

NOW ON SALE AT NEWSSTANDS EVERYWHERE

When I read "Secret of the Earth Star" I was amazed at the many similarities. If you have ever read "Beau Geste" you will also note the sameness. Please don't ruin your magazine with such things.

The rest of the magazine was very good, especially "Horsesense Hank in the Parallel Worlds." The illustrations are some of the best in the science fiction world, and let's have more of the Mac Girl on the cover.

R. L. BILDERBACK,
22 Cottage Street,
Medford, Oregon.

We too are amazed, now that you (and others) have pointed it out to us, at the many parallels in the plot of these two stories. However we don't believe Mr. Kuttner was aware of the coincidence. Sometimes these things slip past your editor but when they do, our readers call it to his attention, and in the future he uses a bit more caution —ED.

HAWK CARSE

Sirs:

This letter is principally an appreciation—an appreciation of the return of Hawk Carse. Along with most other science fiction writers, I have long admired Gilmore's work. Ever since "Four Miles Down" was published in 1931 this author has demonstrated an extraordinary mastery of his chosen form, and I think there are few of us who would not be willing to admit that he is one of our peers. I was dubious when I saw your cover carrying the sensational announcement, but after reading the story I was quite convinced that no counterfeit was being palmed off on your readers. Right or wrong, I accept the author of "The Return of Hawk Carse" as the genuine Anthony Gilmore, for I believe, honestly, that there is no man living who could imitate that smooth, muscular, superbly real style so perfectly. Such a curious blending of pathos, hard-driven dramatic sense, and occasional mawkish spots could not be copied by the best stylist, even though he have a command of imagination concepts equal to Gilmore's (and I know only two writers who have). No, this is the true, the real, and the only Gilmore back with us again, and to say that I am delighted at his return would be an understatement. Gentlemen, fold your hands and bow your heads respectfully; after ten years of silence, a master has returned to show us how it should be done. Listen to him—his magic has not weakened with time.

ARTHUR A. MERLYN,
192 College Avenue,
New Brunswick, N. J.

Yes, Mr. Merlyn, this is the real Anthony Gilmore. And we knew you'd be sure, too, when you read the story. Nor is this the last of Hawk Carse. He will return several more times. Mr. Gilmore is hard at work on more adventures of the romantic, swashbuckling soldier of space.—ED.

(Concluded on page 239)

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FLYING WING OF PLUTO

by HENRY GADE

Like electrically charged foil, the wings of this plane of Pluto enable it to skim an airless world.

THE outermost of the solar system's planets is Pluto, only recently discovered. It is so far from the sun that it is almost entirely a dark world, and certainly a frozen, airless one. What portions of its atmosphere are not frozen, and drifted on its bleak surface as "snow" are very rare, and found only in deep depressions and in underground caves, where the bat-people of Pluto live.

However, Pluto was once a warm world, and had a great civilization. Its mechanical wonders still exist, in working order, creating fresh atmosphere for its underground peoples by recovering it from its frozen state.

There still exist marvelous bat-wing planes constructed on the electrical principle of "like repels like." The electro-magnetic charge of the planet itself is equalled and combatted by the electro-magnetic charges induced in the angular, flat, wings of the flying wing plane. Thus, it can be made to float at any desired height above the surface of the planet.

This ship has no "motors" in the sense that there are moving parts. Electric coils induce alternate polarity in great magnets, which enable the ship to plane its way either "north" or "south" (depending on the magnetic poles of Pluto) or on a "tack" in any other direction. Thus the principle of navigation of this super-scientific ship would be the old, simple one of the Earth sailboat. Many of the aero-glider principles of glider flight on Earth would also be utilized, despite the absence of air currents on which to ride.

Steering this ship would be accomplished by means of rudders and tail-flaps also capable of reversible polarity of electro-magnetic forces. There is still sufficient extremely rare gas in the atmosphere of Pluto to enable the ship to gain sufficient steerage, especially in rising and descending, notably near the ground.

Plutonians, venturing above ground, coming up through tunnels to the surface, and then by enclosed pneumatic elevators up the mountain-sides, to flying wing depots (little air tight structures atop the mountains) could transfer to the hovering plane and be whisked to another portion of the planet in a very short time

Great speed is possible with these flying wings, and the magnet motors would be able to "anchor" themselves to the powerful pull of the planet's self-magnet, and stop the headlong speed of the ship with the most powerful brakes known to science, the pull of a whole planet.

Theoretically, these ships of Pluto are also a form of space ship, and could venture out into the void perhaps as much as ten thousand miles from the surface. From heights such as these, long trips to the other side of the world would be made, because the force of gravity could then be added to the power driving the ship down and forward. However, there would be a limit beyond which the ships would not dare go, lest they get beyond the effective field of the planet's magnetism, which surrounds it in great loops and spirals of energy.

The farther away from the planet, the greater reduction in this force, due to the law of inverse squares; the force will decrease inversely with the square of the distance away from the source.

The flying wing of Pluto would be a medium sized ship, perhaps no more than 120 to 150 feet long, and perhaps 100 to 130 feet wide at the tips of its triangular wings

The cargo and passenger cabin would be slung below the wing itself, in the center of gravity, and would be, in effect, itself the "motor" of the ship, great amounts of wire being coiled into its construction. The "belly" and tail of this section of the ship would be made of a specially electro-magnetically powerful metal and the energy reversing elements would be located in the central part of this cabin, controlled by a simple set of navigational buttons A flight compass would be so "hooked up" to the electro-magnetic coils as to automatically set the ship on a desired course when directionally fixed on its destination.

Almost foolproof, these ships encounter only one danger during flight; the possibility of an electric storm, (such as causes exceptional outbreaks of aurora borealis on Earth) both near the surface, and out in space, where strange forces are known to exist.

(Continued from page 237)

"BUYING UP OLD COPIES"

Sirs:

Have liked AS and FA so well that I have been buying up old copies at the second hand stores. I have not missed a single current issue or a quarterly of either one.

"The Vengeance of Martin Brand" promises to be a swell serial. I am already looking forward to the September issue.

"Secret of the Earth Star" and "Moon Madness" were also very good These three were all "first stories" by the authors for me.

I enjoyed the drawings accompanying the story "The Avengers," and would like to read stories with the war as a background, especially by McGivern and Costello

MELVIN FISHER,
1210 50th Ave.,
Oakland, Calif

We will certainly have stories based on the war for you. No doubt you enjoyed Robert Moore Williams' story in the September issue, "Blitz Against Japan" There'll be more.—ED.

CORRESPONDENCE CORNER

Joe Hensley, 411 S. Fess, Bloomington, Ind., has a complete copy of "The Skylark of Valeron" and about 20 S.F. books to trade. He also has all of A. Merritt's book in mag form to sell or trade. He is willing to trade "Skylark of Valeron" for "The Ship of Ishtar" in book form. . . . Miss Lammy Kleinman, 101—73rd Street, North Bergen, N. J., would like to correspond with enlisted men. . . . Russell Gale, Box 222, Leedey, Oklahoma, has for sale over 400 science fiction magazines dating back to 1926. Also, books and stories by Burroughs, Merritt, Kline, Farley, Cummings, etc Write for price list. . . . Jack Nichols, Wilson, Okla., has 65 mixed science fiction mags for sale or trade. Will send list upon request. Also, he would like to correspond with anyone of approximately 14 years of age, interested in S.F., chemistry, or electricity. . . . Robert Richel, 12-13 Ellis Avenue, Fairlawn, N. J., is anxious to hear from anyone interested in forming a correspondent's club. He has all the details worked out and desires members, all ages from anywhere. Also, he has several back issues of science mags to trade or sell at very reasonable prices. He can play a good game of correspondence chess, speak Spanish, and promises to answer all letters immediately. . . . Aircraft worker, age 19, wishes to correspond with anyone interested in stamp collecting, Spanish, French, airplanes, electricity, or traveling. Write to Robert Taylor Wise, 360 E. Magnolia Blvd., Burbank, Calif. . . . Stanley Amsiejus, R. F. D. No. 1, Pelham, N. H., has a quantity of new weird tales and oriental stories dating back to 1928 that he would like to dispose of. Also, he has some of Edgar Rice Burroughs novels to sell. . . . Michael Andrews, 7304 Tioga St. (8), Pittsburgh, Penn., would like to correspond

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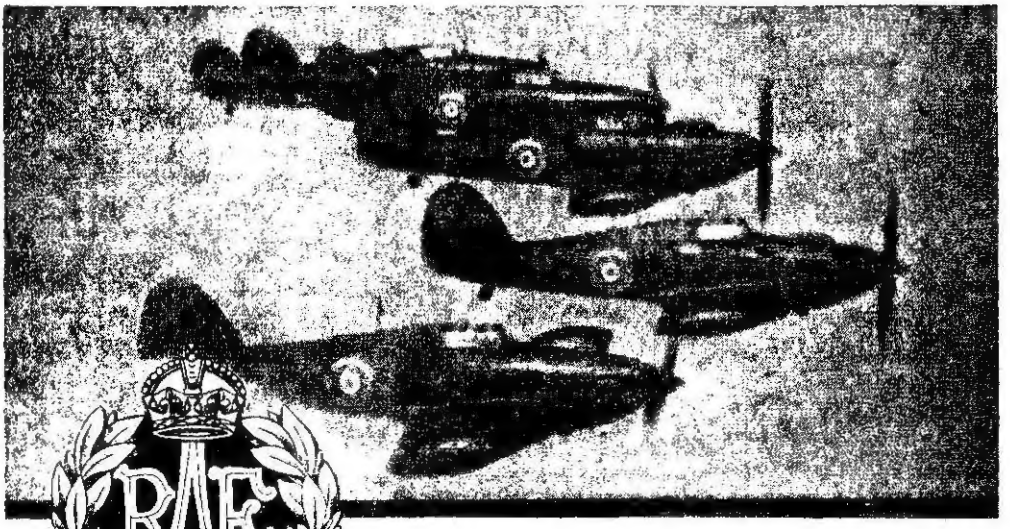
with either boys or girls interested in astronomy, travel, reading scientific fiction stories, etc. He is 17 years old. . . . William F. Coyle, 6933724, Co. M., 15 Inf., APO-3, Ft. Ord, Calif., would like to correspond with girls and boys between the ages of 18-22. He likes all sports, hunting and fishing preferred, likes to travel. . . . Alice Premiel, 270 Aris St., Cheektowago, New York, desires to correspond with soldiers, preferably between the ages of 18-24. . . . Sydney Rome, 39 Stiemens Street, Clifton, Johannesburg, South Africa, age 18½, Arts student at the University of the Witwatersrand, would like very much to correspond with any American science and fantasy-fiction fans on any subjects whatever, and promises faithfully to answer all letters. . . . Richard Post, 4227 Magoun Ave., East Chicago, Ind., has to swap many S.F. mags and books for AMAZING dated 1939 or back, or books by Burroughs or Claudey. Send for list now. . . . Fantasy Fiction Field, illustrated news weekly, will send a month's (4) free copies to any fan who sends in the required postage—4—1½ penny stamps. They would also like to announce that they have over 30,000 science-fiction magazines and books in stock, including all the copies of AMAZING way back to 1926. Their Chicon Convention booklet—25 pages of fotos on the Chicago Science Fiction Convention is now completed. Priced at 50c—only 50 copies to be printed. Get in touch with Julius Unger, Fantasy Fiction Field, 1702 Dahill Road, Brooklyn, N. Y. . . . Larry Price, Roberts, California, 19 years of age, weighs 200 pounds, blue eyes, brown hair, 6' 2", interested in music (all kinds), radio, camera, S.F., collecting and travel, would like to correspond with pen pal girls over 15 years of age. He will answer all letters promptly by airmail. . . . All stfans living in the middlewest and west, contact Harry Schmarje, 318 Stewart Rd., Muscatine, Iowa, for details on joining the midwest's fastest growing fan club, the Midwest Fan Society. . . . Norman Fuld, 32-02—86 Street, Jackson Heights, L. I., N. Y., has a chemical laboratory that he would like to dispose of. It consists of many chemicals—some of C.P. quality and much apparatus consisting of a balance, a condenser, several dozen test tubes and other porcelain, glass and metalware and many rubber stoppers. It is worth $35.00. Will either sell or trade, and would prefer to trade it for a telescope. . . . Carroll Hamlin, 360 S. 14, Salem, Oregon, has complete sets of AMAZING STORIES and other science fiction mags that she will sell in complete groups at face value plus transportation charges to anyone anywhere. . . . Max Belz, Waldoboro, Me., has back numbers of AMAZING and other scientifiction mags to dispose of and with few exceptions at original price. He also wants to engage in correspondence chess, but not with beginners. . . . Bill Caple, 412 North School Street, Lodi, Calif., 17 years of age, would like to correspond with either sex on research work on Black Magic. Age makes no difference. He would prefer contacts with Africa and South America, but will answer all letters immediately, no matter where they are from.



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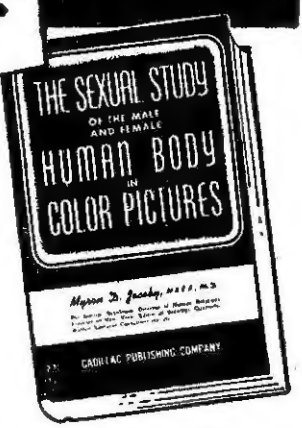

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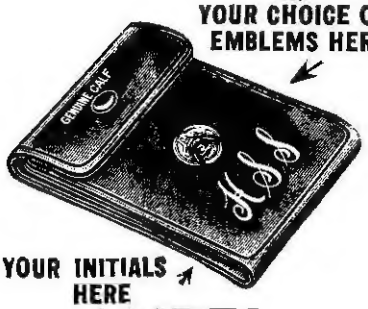

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